

# Mirage of the Desert

Agnes Littlejohn

















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# MIRAGE OF THE DESERT

By Agnes Littlejohn

AUTHOR OF

"A LAPSE OF MEMORY," "THE DAUGHTER OF A SOLDIER,"  
ETC., ETC.

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## Dramatis Personae



Mr. Cleveland	..	..	..	An English Gentleman
Miss Seraphina Smythe	..	..	.	.. His Half Sister
Dick..	..	.	..	.. His Son
Cecil Beresford	..	..	..	.. His Niece
John Middleton	..	..	..	A Rich Young Englishman
Ibrahim	..	..	..	.. An Arab Dragoman
Mustafa, Ali, and other Arabs of the Caravan				
The Great Solitary Sheikh	The Sheikh of all the Sheikhs			
Ahmed Bey	..	..	..	.. A Noble Arab Sheikh
Mahmoud Bey	..	..	..	.. His Cousin
Meshow	..	..	..	.. His Nephew
Ghudda	..	..	..	Meshow's Foster-Brother
Suleyman ibn Mirshid	..	..	..	.. Another Arab Sheikh
Fetneh	..	..	..	.. His Daughter
Yusuf	..	..	..	.. One of His Sons
Nasli	..	..	..	.. Fetneh's Black Slave
Douhi and His Friend	..	..	..	Two Smaller Arab Sheikhs
Beshara	..	..	..	.. An Arab, Friend to Meshow

An Old Bedouin Sheikh, and other Bedouins

SCENE. First in Algiers and afterwards in the Desert



# MIRAGE OF THE DESERT



## CHAPTER I.

“In Algiers we meet again,” John Middleton said eagerly, as he took Cecil’s hand in his.

He glanced quickly at her brilliant face, but found not there what he had sought; and his own face, bright and eager, fell a little, as he turned to greet her cousin.

“My father got your telegram, Mr. Middleton,” said Dick, as they shook hands. “He was so pleased to hear you would go with us to the desert.”

“We delayed our journey,” Cecil said. “expecting your arrival by each steamer from

Marseilles. Uncle would not start, because he hoped you might arrive in time to go with us. You were not quite certain when we talked about it on the ship. You said you had taken the voyage for a holiday after studying hard in London. We longed for some experience of desert life, and so made up our minds to travel there. Uncle James preferred the Algerian route. He thought that it was wilder, and more interesting."

Diek had turned aside to speak with an acquaintance who was passing near, and Middleton and Cecil paused, to wait for him.

"You are in trouble," Cecil said, impulsively, as her sympathetic eyes fell on the band of mourning the young man wore on his arm.

"I have lately lost my father, and I'm perplexed and worried. I left the vessel hurriedly because I got a message, recalling me, on account of my father's illness. Miss Beresford, I've an urgent reason for my journey—a strange quest in the desert."

"Will you tell me of it?"

"One day I will tell you—out upon the desert."

They had spoken their last words so softly that Diek Cleveland and his friend, who had been chat-

ting near them, had not overheard. The boy rejoined them now.

“Mr. Middleton, of course you’ll come home with us,” he suggested cordially, “to see Aunt Seraphina and my father? They’re expecting you to call.”

“I shall be most happy, Dick. I’ve arranged about my luggage and my lodging, and have nothing to detain me. I am glad I met you and your cousin here on landing.”

Middleton had first seen Algiers, with its terraces, white villas, and palm trees, in the sunny freshness of early morning. The hills and valleys round about Algiers were looking beautiful with their gardens and country seats. The gardens afforded shade and retirement, and a delightful prospect towards the sea, appearing brilliant in the morning sunshine, with their lovely blossoms and fresh green foliage. The more wealthy people made their homes here during the summer heat.

“We have taken one of those detached white villas over there,” said Cecil, as they walked.

“I know them,” answered Middleton. “Little white houses well shaded with trees.”

“Tangier is simply a region of lovely gardens.”



“There’s plenty of fruit,” said Dick. “Melons and apricots are better than a fine view.”

“How is Miss Smythe?” asked Middleton presently.

“She is very well, and is enjoying herself immensely. She will be pleased at meeting you again.”

“Aunt Seraphina’s been busy riding mules, to get ready for the desert,” said Dick, with some disgust. “‘When I go to Rome,’ says Aunt Seraphina, ‘I make a point of doing as the Romans do!’ I wish to goodness she’d learnt to ride on anything at all before she came out here. Even old Brindle, the cow, might have been of use to her! How ever we shall manage with her on the desert, I don’t know. And she’s notions, too, about the proper way. The other day I saw her trying to mount her mule. An unwilling and despairing Arab, much puzzled by her teaching, tried to give her the usual mount for a horse, by making for her fairy foot a stirrup with his hands. Each time she mounted on it, it gave way beneath her tread; for she always failed to spring at the right instant; and so, with shrill protests, she came to earth again. But Aunt Seraphina still rides mules as perseveringly as ever!”

“‘Hope springs eternal in the human breast.’” said Middleton. “It has been said that hope dies

harder than any quality of the heart. By the bye, what became of that young parson who was so attentive to your aunt on board the ship?"

"You mean young Molyneaux?" laughed Dick. "Aunt Seraphina frightened him so desperately that he left the ship at Naples."

"Frightened him? Why, how was that?"

"Well, one day, as usual, he carried her cushions for her, and arranged them tenderly on her deck-chair. 'You must not be so attentive to me. Mr. Molyneaux,' quoth my aunt; 'people might talk, you know!' Poor, innocent, young Molyneaux, who's exactly twenty-five years younger than she is, and who must have thought of her as a dear mother, blushed to the very roots of his downy hair; and, as I said, he left the ship *at* Naples, and went the rest of his journey overland."

"Why are you so certain of Aunt Seraphina's age?" asked Cecil curiously. "It is a fact that she will not impart to anyone."

"Thereby hangs a tale," said Dick, mysteriously. "When I was a little chap I plained her to tell me how old she was. 'There's one thing,' said she, crossly, 'you're a very rude little boy to ask a lady's age!' 'How old were you when you came to London, aunt?' 'About eighteen, I think.' 'How

long have you been here?' 'Oh, twenty-four years.' Then I was busy with a bit of paper and a pencil for a minute. I hadn't wrestled vainly with gritty stairs, and squeaking pencils, and addition sums! 'You'll be forty-two on Saturday!' I cried, triumphantly. And I've kept count of her birthdays, and added on the years, ever since."

"Do you ever think of our funny fellow-passengers on board the Victoria?"

"Yes. There was that fat little man," said Dick, "who paraded the ship's deck in a Panama hat and pyjamas, barefoot, of a morning, in the warm part of the trip, leading his small son by the hand. The youngster, also, wore pyjamas, and was barefoot—a small copy of his father, and wearing on his head a Panama hat that had seen better days, and which had belonged to his parent until he got himself a new one at Colombo, when he gave the old one to his little son. It was rather like Elijah's mantle descending upon Elisha; only that it was far too big for him!"

"I recollect a man whom I used to overhear in the cabin next to mine," said Middleton. "vainly endeavouring to convince his wife that tobacco-smoking in a small closed-up cabin purified the air by destroying innumerable microbes. 'I'd rather

have the microbes,' answered she; 'and, anyway, I don't believe it!'

"Do you remember the fancy-dress ball," laughed Cecil, "when Aunt Seraphina's elderly admirer, Mr. Sproggins, upset that cup of coffee over the back breadths of her best silk dress?"

"She stood in front of him," said Dick, "flirting with Dr. Clark, blissfully ignorant of the mishap. Mr. Sproggins stood with the empty cup, gazing miserably at Aunt Seraphina's ruined dress. When the inevitable moment of discovery arrived he was quite crushed!"

"Then there was the man in love with a girl who had jilted him," said Middleton.

"His dear mother thought a trip round the world might help him to forget his griefs," said Dick, "and she was travelling with him. The fellow told me all about his love affairs. I said I'd not want a girl who didn't want me. He told me, one evening, he didn't blame the girl, but her purse-proud relations, for the breaking-off of their engagement. But, by the morning, he had changed his mind again. 'I think she has treated me in a most unwomanly way!' he said. I always thought a rejected, love-sick man ought to starve himself at meals," mused Dick, "until I saw he could still feel

it very deeply even when he ate his dinner with an appetite. And this fellow's appetite was as good as ever. Well, love is cheap—so cheap that there are several degrees of it."

"Apropos," said Middleton, "there was the middle-aged married man who was so infatuated with Miss Gore. One day I saw her carrying a deck-chair a few yards, and he rushed up and took it away from her. 'Do you suppose I'd let you carry that heavy chair?' he asked, with tender reproach. 'Of course not!' said she, smartly; 'but yesterday I saw you allow your wife to stagger under hers the whole length of the deck.'"

"Do you remember that poor woman travelling in the second-class," said Cecil, "who was reported to be in such awful need of spiritual comfort?"

"The one who had lost her husband by an accident, and never got over it?"

"The same," responded Dick. "So Mr. Molyneaux was asked to go and see her. He asked the messenger how long ago it was. 'Oh, fourteen years ago,' was the reply. 'And she has mourned him ever since!' said Molyneaux, much impressed. 'Constancy, thy name is woman!' A friend of hers had lost her husband, too, by the same accident, and they were travelling together. Mr. Molyneaux



went over to the second-class saloon, where Mrs. Simpson rocked herself and wept, sustained by Mrs. Brown, who was also shedding tears abundantly. 'Your dear ones are together, now,' quavered Molyneaux, vainly endeavouring to think of consolation. 'David has met his Jonathan! Is not that a comfort to you, Mrs. Simpson?' 'My David niver liked that Jonathan,' objected she, 'when they was both alive; and it can't be any comfort, sir, to him, nor yet to me!' 'But only think how happy he must be, dwelling in that better country, singing as he plays upon his golden harp!' 'Yes, there's the 'arps,' she responded, bitterly, with a fresh flow of tears. 'E aint niver 'ad no ear fer moosiek, neither; and 'e allers 'ated singin', did my David, let alone the 'arps. And 'arps is old-fashioned in these days, besides, sir. The 'arps'll sorter worrit 'im. And as fer Jonathan, 'is voice 'ud frighten cows, let alone 'is feller angels!' The poor parson looked unhappy and embarrassed now. 'Well,' he suggested feebly, 'at any rate we will all be in one kind of fashion there. And I am certain we will all be happy, each in our own manner of happiness!' 'Then there won't be no 'arps to worry David?' she asked, eagerly. He blinked his eyes uneasily and hesitated. 'Well, as to that, I cannot say, for certain.' Here

his sleeve was plucked indignantly by Mrs. Brown, who was visibly affected. 'Lor', sir, you 'adn't ought ter talk like that ter Hannah! Though I don't 'old ter like the 'arps myself. But it's in the Bible they are there. And it aint sound doctrine ter dispartidge of 'em. It aint otherdox, nor yet it aint judeeshous. And Hannah'll be sorter disappointed when she goes to 'er long 'ome if things aint quite as she expected 'em ter be. It aint right of you ter raise false 'opes. The 'arps is there, and we'll all 'ave ter play on 'em, a-sittin' on gold chairs!' "

"And what said Molyneaux?"

"Why, he fled to his own cabin in sheer dismay, quite routed. He felt the situation was too difficult for his small powers to cope with."

As they talked they finally arrived at the terrace of a beautifully-placed, detached white villa, with luxuriant gardens on all sides, overlooking the rich, turquoise-coloured sea. Here Middleton was welcomed warmly by Mr. Cleveland and his half-sister, Miss Seraphina Smythe.

"Did you cross over here directly from Marseilles?" asked Middleton, incidentally, in the course of conversation.

"No; after you left the ship, we did a little

travelling together on the other side of the Mediterranean, and then went to Gibraltar."

"I was charmed with the flower markets there, and with the pretty girls who sold the flowers," said Cecil.

"Afterwards, we crossed the straits to Tangier, where we arrived at five o'clock on a sunny afternoon."

"The instant you reach the quay at Tangier, you are annoyed by crowds of bare-legged Arabs," commented Miss Seraphina, with severity.

"I've never seen one bare-headed, though," said Dick.

"The tarboosh," said Mr. Cleveland, pompously, "seems to be an indispensable portion of attire amongst the Faithful. The dusky followers of Mahomet near Tangier wear the brown jelabi, and mostly the small, coloured skull-cap."

"I have never seen them without their red cap, indoors or out," said Middleton. I believe they sleep in it."

"I expect it's the long, blue tassel on the cap that's so attractive to them," suggested Dick.

"But I've often seen them with a red guncase instead, wound round their heads," said Middleton.

"In Tangier," said Dick, "when I met a Moor and said 'Salaama!' the Moor always replied 'Salaama!' Why would he not say 'Salaama, Ali-kum,' to me?"

"The Arabs carefully dispense with the use of the word 'Alikum,' " said Mr. Cleveland, "because it is a word they never use to unbelievers of their faith."

"What I most dislike amongst the Orientals," said Miss Seraphina, "is their greed for money, and their impertinence in meddling with my precious parcels when I lay them down."

"Oh, that is a customary Eastern trait," said Mr. Cleveland. "You will find it everywhere amongst the Arab race."

"It's merely their way of founding a claim on travellers," laughed Middleton.

"If I stop for a single moment in a crowd," complained Miss Seraphina, "a beggar instantly pounces on me, crying, 'Baksheesh, ya Sittah!' in their usual heathenish way."

"Sometimes we could barely make our start, indeed," said Mr. Cleveland, "on account of their importunate demands."

"We've often been besieged by the whole troop of them at once," said Dick.

“Mr. Middleton, had you a pleasant trip across?” asked Cecil.

“Well, the day was bright enough when we left Marseilles, but we had a stormy night, and, therefore, made but little way. We had a run of thirty-four hours.”

“I suppose you took a through ticket from London to Marseilles?”

“Yes. I telegraphed from London the instant I decided on my expedition, and secured a berth beforehand in the Algerine steamer, the ‘Sudan.’ I had heard from your uncle in the interval, a forecast of your movements, and expected that I would find you somewhere in Algiers.”

“Will you go with me to-morrow morning to select the animals for our contemplated journey?” asked Mr. Cleveland, as their visitor rose to take his leave.

“I will meet you early,” answered Middleton. “I’m going now to see about my own effects, and to make my private preparations. Meantime, ‘Au revoir.’ ”



## CHAPTER II.

The following morning they started preparation for their journey. The day was spent in overhauling their baggage, and getting their caravan together.

"We shall want a dragoman, and tents, and twelve or fourteen mules to carry baggage. And must have either riding mules or horses," said Mr. Cleveland.

He knitted his brows in perplexity.

"Camels would be more serviceable for a long desert journey," suggested Middleton.

"True," assented Mr. Cleveland. "And we would require but few of them. But we must have a dragoman to command our party. With a reliable guide and suitable escort, we run small risk in taking such an expedition."

Later in the morning they went out to see some camels which had been brought out from the Sok for their inspection.

"Here, at last, is my chance for studying the habits of the camel," said Dick. "It looks difficult enough to mount—but how to get off again is an even greater puzzle!"

"Oh, that is a matter of small difficulty," laughed Middleton, "as you may soon discover."

"That sounds like a challenge!" said Dick; "and I'm sure camel riding is not half so hard as you think. At any rate, I'm going to try."

As soon as the Arabs understood his wish, a camel was led up for him to mount. It knelt down, and he climbed into the saddle. An Arab then uttered an uncouth guttural sound, at which the camel lurched clumsily up again, with the result that Dick instantly flew out of the saddle, landing several feet away on the sand.

"Well!" he said ruefully, feeling himself all over to see if any bones were broken; "I know now what it is for pride to have a fall! I never quite believed that tale about the falling of the apple on Newton's head," he added thoughtfully. "The discoverer of the law of gravitation must have been himself the falling apple—perhaps from camel back."

"You are not really hurt, my boy?" asked Mr. Cleveland, anxiously, as his son made no attempt to rise.

"Do you see that awfully human look of unkindness in the camel's face?" said Dick, staring gloomily up at the animal. "Upon my word, he looks so contemptuous that I feel quite ashamed!"

"Well," said Middleton, "I warned you that the easiest part of the business was to get down."

"One might become quite used to it in time," said Mr. Cleveland, with philosophy.

"Perhaps one might—in time," said Dick, with feeling; "but I'd rather know the limits first! You'd need as many lives as a cat to do it," he added, as an afterthought.

"We must have dromedaries for the ladies," suggested Middleton.

"If their pace is easy, I should like one for myself, in preference to a horse," said Mr. Cleveland.

"The pace of the well-bred dromedary is delightfully easy, and very swift."

"I am negotiating for a dragoman to act as our guide," said Mr. Cleveland. "And we must lay in some suitable provisions for our journey."

"Buy plenty of dried figs, dates, and bread," said Middleton. "The Arabs call it 'doorra,' and it is good, though rather coarse."

"Look!" said Dick, as they were taking their way homewards. "Here's Aunt Seraphina coming

out to meet us. I always know when my Aunt Seraphina's coming. I can see her a long way off—a dark blot of umbrella held up above her head where it is shady—bright sunshine everywhere but where Aunt Seraphina walks! Upon my word, it must be a reflection of her own temperament!”

He paused to gaze reflectively into the distance at the approaching figure.

“I broke her oldest umbrella once, when I was a little chap,” he added, reminiscently, “because I heard her say she didn’t know what to do with it, it was of no earthly use to her. But she’d a turn for economy—which came out in umbrellas; and she was trying to wear it out, because she didn’t like to waste it. So I thought she’d be grateful to me, and, perhaps, she’d double the half-crown she’d promised me for a Christmas-box. When Aunt Seraphina found it broken, she suddenly discovered that she valued it. So she spent my half-crown on a new umbrella-stick. But a man tripped over it in the train, and split it; so I got even with the old girl on that score!”

“Oh, ‘the giftie gie us, to see ourselves as ithers see us!’ ” laughed Middleton. “I fancy we all have our pet economy—in string, or pins, or paper, or what not.”

Later in the day they were told that their Arab

dragoman, Ibrahim, had arrived. They found his men and camels in a body, lying under the palm trees at the distance of a mile or two outside the city, all ready for the journey.

After a few words with Middleton, who could speak Arabic fairly well, the dragoman gave his men an order, and a busy scene ensued.

“My men are trying the paces of the dromedaries for thy women,” said Ibrahim to Mr. Cleveland, in his broken English.

Their paces were tried, and they chose several smooth-paced ones.

The first loading of the camels was a tremendous business. From an early hour the sound of nimble Arab tongues had mingled with the discontented cries of snarling camels. The owners of the camels were quarrelling over the apportioned burdens, and the camels, seemingly aware of this, endeavoured to aid their cause by protesting bitterly against any freight at all. It was the usual bickering that took place before a desert caravan departed on a journey.

They reached their first encampment that evening as it was growing dark, and Dick declared with glee he felt that they were actually in the desert. On the following morning they were all astir at sunrise, happy and excited, beginning their desert life.



Separate loads were arranged for the baggage camels, and saddles were built for the women. Then they all mounted their dromedaries and set forward on their journey.

Their company consisted of five of their own party; the dragoman, Ibrahim; his trusty Arabs, baggage camels, five dromedaries, and a horse. In front rode Ibrahim, and then the women; behind, Mr. Cleveland rode with his son and Middleton; and at the back were the Arabs and baggage camels. Cecil and Miss Seraphina rode in comfortable saddles, and were well protected from the sun. An Arab on foot led each dromedary; the baggage camels being guided only by a strange cry that seemed to be well understood by them.

“We’ve turned our faces away from civilisation and dull boredom, Cecil—we’ve set out at last for the wild and free old wilderness!” exclaimed her cousin, with unsuppressed delight; and watching a long train of camels pass them on their way into the city, bringing loads of dates.

“As we came to the edge of the desert, where the country is quite open, did you notice a difference in the air?” asked Middleton, riding to Cecil’s side.

“Yes; I noticed a great difference,” said Cecil. “The air is light and pure.”

“I enjoy this way of travelling,” said Miss

Seraphina, with satisfaction. "Mr. Middleton, you are aware that I am taking this journey for my health?"

"Which has always been unfailingly good," commented Dick, sotto voce.

"I was always in the hands of doctors," said Miss Seraphina. "I was afraid to show them my tongue, lest an operation might be thought necessary. One hears of nothing but these necessary operations nowadays!"

"I find the motion of my dromedary easy, and very pleasant," said Mr. Cleveland, riding up to them.

"You'll be able to read, and write, or sleep, riding, father," Dick exclaimed; "or sort your specimens. And Aunt Seraphina can write up her diary the moment anything happens!"

"I do not suppose that we will wish to sleep upon our travels," Mr. Cleveland answered, smiling at his animated face.

"Not at this early stage of novelty," laughed Middleton. "But later on, perhaps."

"There lies the way to the Great Desert! Let us look with awe upon its unknown face!" said Cecil.

Before them was a rolling, undulating plain of stones and sand. As far as eye could reach appeared

hillock after hillock of yellow earth, varied here and there by an oasis of palms, a well, or, perhaps, a little village. At other times, just a great dun-coloured expanse, stretching out towards the grey and brown and purple hills beyond, in distance, far away from view.

Depressions, and hills of sand and rock; in some places long, rolling undulations, appearing like a succession of long waves of sand, with deep, wide troughs and abrupt crests.

Rocky gorges, level plains of sand, tracts strewn with large stones, so thickly scattered that there appeared scarcely room to place the foot. In other parts the sandy plains were covered with small stones.

Just before they reached the camp they passed a caravan returning to the city, and the respective leaders of the caravans politely asked each others' business.

"The passing caravans always seem to speak each other, like ships," said Dick.

"I always make a point, myself, of asking people personal questions, as a matter of principle," remarked Miss Seraphina. "Some of the folk 'board ship objected to it. People who dislike my personal inquiries about their private business always seem to me to have something wrong about them. They

might be in trade, might be shady individuals, be anything, or anybody. For my own part, I won't know people unless I know who they are, and what they do, and all about them."

"And what about yourself?" suggested Dick.

"Oh, that's a different matter, of course. I expect to be taken on pure trust. To be doubted would be insulting to me!"

They found all in readiness for them at the encampment when they reached it.

"We have been fortunate in our first day," said Cecil. "It has been a fine, clear, sunny day; and the fresh wind blowing behind us has kept the air cool."

"And one does not feel much fatigued," said Mr. Cleveland; "the movement of the dromedary is so smooth and easy."

"How interesting our camp looks," Dick exclaimed as they approached. "Our tents are all alight with Eastern lamps."

"The camels lie picturesquely grouped about the tents," said Cecil, looking round; "the night fires of the Arabs are already burning. This evening scene would make a charming subject for an artist."

"I know an artist who has painted pictures of these scenes," said Dick. "His name is Henry

West. I've seen his sketches. He'd make a splendid auctioneer!"

"Why so?"

"Because he paints bad pictures!"

"Is your reasoning quite logical?" asked Middleton. "Why should a bad artist make a splendid auctioneer?"

"Because he cries his own bad pictures up so well!"

"Well, if he be successful," said Middleton, "as I expect he will, there will soon be a change of opinion on your part; and other people will show a change of front. I know the man."

"Everyone to his own taste," said Dick. "Apropos, I once overheard between three men a discussion that impressed me very much. 'Oh, I wouldn't give thirty pounds for a mere picture,' said a jeweller; 'now, see this fine diamond; and it's only sixty guineas!' 'No wonder you jewellers grow rich,' cried the picture-dealer, enviously. 'I wouldn't give sixty guineas for a diamond ring. Look at this picture, now—a gem of art—a thing of beauty is a joy for ever! And I offer it to you for the small sum of thirty pounds!' 'Pish!' exclaimed the matter-of-fact merchant; 'don't show me your trashy gems; one might as well buy bits of glass—all rubbish, I assure you. As

for the picture, well, I might make shift to hang that on my walls. I'll give five pounds for that, and not a penny more!"

"I am glad to see the cooks are busy at their little kitchens," said Miss Seraphina, sauntering up.

"They can cook very well, although their kitchens are so primitive," said Mr. Cleveland. "just those small iron stands, containing fiery charcoal, on the sand in front of their tents. The result, in the form of dinner, is a creditable enough performance for the desert! Last night's dinner was really very good. The coffee, or course, is always excellent."

"Still, of course, I don't like folk to care too much about their dinner," remarked Miss Seraphina, admonishingly. "Some people whom I observed upon the ship ate a great deal at meals. I will not name them. One morning, at breakfast, he ate five plates, and fruit as well. He had a mother," said Miss Seraphina, with asperity, "who was almost as capable. 'Capable' is the safest word to use—capable!"

"Aunt Seraphina's alluding to young Mr. Smith," said Dick. "Five plates! He must have been an ostrich! Surely plates are rather indigestible! That reminds me of my tutor. The woman at his lodgings used to make

his toast so hard, because, in an unlucky moment, he had told her that he liked it crisp. One morning, at breakfast, it was as hard as bricks. He broke his teeth on it. He told her, sarcastically, that she was the very queen for making toast! Unluckily, the sarcasm was quite thrown away on her, she actually took it as a compliment! And ever since, the woman has excelled herself in making his toast hard!"

"Look here," said Middleton; "you ladies are to occupy this little tent apart. It is nearly ready for you now. You will find your luggage all unloaded and arranged in it."

"We must establish our order of travel." Mr. Cleveland said that evening after dinner. "It is a custom of the Bedouins to start on an expedition not in the morning, but afternoon. But I propose to start every morning at eight o'clock; have two or three hours' riding before the mid-day rest; then, after lunch, ride to our tents, which we should reach at sunset."

"The cool of the morning is unquestionably the best time for travel here," said Middleton.

"The loaded camels and the cooks can be sent forward as usual," said Mr. Cleveland, "whilst we halt for rest and luncheon. They can rest upon the way. By the time that we come up with them, the



tents will always be pitched, and the baggage arranged in them; and our dinner will be nearly ready. This will allow us ample leisure for rest and a change before we dine."

This plan, once arranged, they agreed to adhere to it, with but the intermissions of the Sunday's rest.

As Cecil and Miss Seraphina stood together, just outside their tent, they heard the low hum of Arab talk, the mutter of the camel-drivers to their camels, and the dull champing of the tethered camels.

"It is a warm, still night. What a congenial home the encampment makes!" said Miss Seraphina, blithely; "life, and cheerful sounds of movement are on every side."

"The desert seems so dream-like in the moonlight," murmured Cecil, as she gazed around, pausing ere she turned to follow her aunt within the tent.

"Well, do come to bed now, Cecil. I am tired out!"

And Miss Seraphina turned into the tent and threw herself upon her camp-bed, where she lay yawning with fatigue.

The faint tinkling of distant bells was sounding in Cecil's ears, and she stood still to listen. A

caravan was passing by in the far distance. The sound of the bells on the baggage camels could be heard faintly, a long way off. She stood listening until they gradually died away again.

At last she went inside the tent. The drowsy Arab cries soon ceased, the lights went out, and the wonderful, weird silence of the desert night enveloped them round. And all was quiet and peaceful round the whole of the encampment.

### CHAPTER III.

"We are getting used to our new life," said Cecil, with delight, to Middleton, as they rode side by side. "I enjoy this rising with the sun, the strange cries of the camels, the bustle of packing. They are delightful to me."

"Breakfast finished," added Middleton, "tents struck, and all our party mounted, our encampment of the evening before is given back to the waste."

"We seem fortunate in our Arabs," Cecil said.

"We are. Mustafa is an excellent all-round man. He is rather indolent; but he is thoroughly good-natured."

"I like Selim best," said Dick. "He's always bright and cheery."

"I heard a quarrel this morning, between two Arabs who were loading camels. The men seemed positively dangerous. One of them was your good-natured Mustafa. What was the fuss about?" asked Cecil, curiously.

"Oh, each of them wished to put as little luggage on his own camel's back as he could," said

Middleton, laughing. "They quarrelled over some addition to their appointed loads. Their camels joined them in noisy abuse, and in angry objections to some small article of baggage."

"And they said unkind things about each other's departed grandfather," said Dick. "as is the way with angry Arabs. They call it 'giving him much hard words.' Mustafa also said to Ali's camel: 'May thy harem be childless!' and said things uncomplimentary about his destiny. Then Ibrahim came up and told them it was not curses, but hard work, that was required."

As he spoke, there was a slight commotion amongst the baggage camels, and some compact article was mysteriously hurtled through the air, falling with a spongy thud upon the sand by Miss Seraphina's dromedary. It had been violently hurled there by an Arab's angry hand.

"Y'Allah!" cried Mustafa. "Oulah!—oa—oa!" ("Take care—take care!")

"O'ah! Garda!" added Ali. "Take care—out of the way. Camel coming!"

Next moment the camel had trodden heavily upon the article, and Miss Seraphina gave a sudden shriek of mingled anger, anguish, and dismay.

"What is that? Why, I declare, it is my own best cushion!" she exclaimed, with sudden shock

and much emotion. "The camel has trodden on it—and it is spoilt—quite spoilt!"

As she looked down upon the much-befrilled, silken ruins, she was visibly affected, and cast scathing glances of reproach upon Mustafa, whom she scolded in English, which he did not understand. Ali, who could speak a little English, with appropriate gestures, answered volubly.

"It not my load—Mustafa put it on when I not looking," said the Arab, angrily. "May his great grandfather's grave be defiled! Malesch! May Allah destroy his father and his grandfather in the flames of the infernal regions!"

"Oulah!" ("By Allah!") said Mustafa, calmly.

"May Allah burn thy great grandfather and thy great grandmother," said the good-natured Ali fervently, in reply. "May Allah destroy thy house!"

In dignified silence, Mustafa stalked away. He deigned not to reply.

"This meaningless curse is a favourite one with them, apparently," said Middleton to Cecil.

"There's plenty of repetition of it," Dick observed. "not much fear of their forgetting it."

"I must say I feel quite ferocious about my cushion," complained Miss Seraphina.

“Well, get a pillow, and thump it till you feel calmer,” suggested her unsympathetic nephew. “‘He who gives way to anger punishes himself for the fault of another.’ Pray, keep at least the semblance of your temper. ‘Assume a virtue if you have it not. Refrain to-day, and this shall lend a kind of easiness to the next abstinence; the next more easy.’ ”

“You should show me more respect!” exclaimed his aunt. “Try to behave like a gentleman, if you do not feel like one.”

“Ah! I’m afraid I’m wanting in the bump of veneration,” replied her nephew, sadly.

“I’m sure Mustafa’s sorry for the mishap,” suggested Middleton.

“‘Though thou repent, yet have I still the loss,’ ” Dick quoted, sotto voce.

“Mustafa’s sorrow will not mend my cushion,” said Miss Seraphina, sadly.

“‘The offender’s sorrow yields but scant relief,’ ” commented Dick. “Mustafa’s sorrow will not mend Aunt Seraphina’s cushion.”

But neither of the two Arabs cared a jot about Miss Seraphina’s woe; though, later on, they made their personal quarrel up.

“It’s the don’t-care people who ride roughshod over everyone,” said Dick reflectively.

“And it’s clearly a case of fusion,” added Middleton. “Ali understands the art of carrying the war into the enemy’s camp. He goes over to the opposition—and then conquers them. He’s an adept at it. I even heard him giving Mustafa ‘delicious words,’ as he calls an unlimited supply of flattery.”

The caravan was straggling along at the usual slow swing of the baggage camels. The sun would not be high enough for some time yet to cause the tropical shimmer, for it was still early in the morning; and the wide, brown landscape, with its distant violet edging, stood out distinctly in that dry, clear air.

“Let us get down and walk awhile,” said Middleton to Cecil. “There is no heat yet, and very little glare, and we can easily walk the pace of the camels.”

“The air is pure and soft,” said Cecil, when they had alighted; “and this wild scenery is delightful. I like this dry, light air. I like this novelty of life. It has the charm of variety.”

“There’s positively nothing here to show us we’re not on the same track we passed along at the same time the day before,” said Dick.

“No. The landmarks seldom vary. Look; here are apparently the same small, aromatic shrubs



upon the self-same spot that we passed yesterday.”

They were now losing the long levels of pebbly desert, and coming once again upon the sunburnt rocks and rich orange-coloured sand.

“Does the desert always look the same, all through the year?” asked Dick.

“Mustafa says the deserts are quite different in aspect at different seasons of the year,” said Middleton.

“Immense plains,” said Mr. Cleveland, “at one time sterile wastes, in the spring and after rains are quite reclaimed, and in certain parts are plentifully supplied with luxuriant pastorage and these aromatic shrubs, and even flowers.”

They could see some scattered huts in the distance now, and light wreaths of smoke gently rising from them—probably from the fires of wandering nomads. At a greater distance, here and there, some tiny oases could be seen, denoting the presence of water-springs.

“Well, there may be some monotony in a prolonged desert life,” said Mr. Cleveland, “but there is also bound to be, in travelling here, much interest.”

“Indeed, there is,” said Cecil, heartily.

“In certain parts of the desert,” added Middle-

ton, "and in certain seasons, I am told, it is quite enjoyable."

"I find the atmosphere peculiarly fresh and pure," said Mr. Cleveland.

"And the nights are calm and cool," said Cecil, "even in this hot weather, and after a long day beneath the fiercest sun."

"Of course, as there's so much sun, the desert's bound to be always warm," said Dick.

"On the contrary," said Mr. Cleveland, "I am assured by travellers that in winter the northern parts of the desert are deserted. The rains are often heavy, and in fine weather strong winds sweep over these vast plains with piercing cold. They say that there are even frosts by night."

"You astonish me!" said Dick.

"How about the height of summer?" Cecil asked.

"The heat in summer is excessive. The sun pours down with unmitigated fierceness on the dry, parched plains."

"I thought," said Middleton, "the heat was always tempered by a cooling breeze?"

"By high wind, perhaps; but then this raises storms and clouds of sand, borne along at great velocity in columns like waterspouts."

"It must be curious," said Dick, "to watch the

little whirlwinds lift the sand, and send it twisting and twirling over the plain like a great column. I saw a picture once.”

“Well, Dick, perhaps you may have occasion to discover for yourself they justify their proverbial name of ‘devils.’ I believe it is no slight matter to have one break over you.”

“All the same, I’d like to see a sand-storm.”

“When we were at Tangier,” said Mr. Cleveland, “a traveller, just arrived from Morocco, told me of a sand-storm he saw there. He said: ‘First I noticed a strange haze. It soon began to blow, and the fine sand came in heavy clouds. Everything was quickly hidden by the dust. For several hours it blew, and the whole city was apparently deserted.’ ”

They re-mounted their dromedaries soon, and travelled on until the midday halt, when they stopped for rest and luncheon. The camels swung superciliously up, knelt down in a line at command, the riders dismounted from their dromedaries, and the attendant Arabs laid chopped ‘tibbin’ upon cloths in front of them.

“Do you notice the difference,” said Middleton to Cecil, “between our dromedaries and the baggage camels. The well-bred dromedary will not eat his ‘tibbin’ from the ground!”

“How gracefully they move their well-poised

heads," said Cecil. "I have grown fond of my own dromedary, with its beautiful and gentle eyes."

After lunch and a long rest, they rode on again. When they dismounted at encampment in the evening, rather weary, Miss Seraphina went straight to her own tent. Cecil lingered behind with Middleton, to watch the setting of the sun.

As the sun set, the cry "To prayer, to prayer!" rose up. The cry rang out into the still evening air.

"God is the only God—Mahomet is His Prophet! Come to prayer!"

And all the Arabs threw themselves with one accord upon the ground, and placed their foreheads on the sand. All around them the men of the desert prayed. The sight of the praying Arabs impressed Cecil greatly. She and Middleton glanced gravely at each other, and then turned silently away, their faces filled with unexpressed, deep thought.

"As evening comes on these desert scenes arouse strange memories in me," said Middleton, presently. "The encampment, with its groups of kneeling camels; the Arabs praying apart, their faces turned to Mecca; and that golden glory in the West, as day is ending."

"Here night seems to follow day with startling suddenness," responded Cecil.

A caravan was moving slowly along the desert track towards the South. The desert lay beyond and all around it. Rose-coloured hills stretched away towards the South. The far distance was becoming dim, mysterious, and blue, like distant sea. There were still some last, pale glimmerings of day. The cool night wind that blows in the desert waste when the sun has set began to whisper faintly, and to lightly fan their cheeks. The palms appeared far off, where a small oasis showed as a dark patch.

“One of the greatest mysteries of this mysterious desert is the false dawn that comes before nightfall,” said Middleton. “Most people think, mistakenly, it comes before daylight, and just before the real dawn comes.”

“The great Omar termed it beautifully as ‘Dawn’s left hand in the sky!’ ”

“Think!” said Middleton, in a low, awed voice, “we are passing slowly through the ancient wilderness. We may see strange things here together.”

“There were two features in Algiers,” said Cecil, “that struck me most, as marking the Oriental character of the place. They seem to follow us here.”

“You mean the Muezzin’s cry from the domes and minarets of the Mosques. And the palm trees.”

“Yes. I’m interested in the Moslem faith,” said Cecil, dreamily. “In Algiers the Muezzin’s call to prayer affected me each time I heard the call. I never got used to it. It never palled on me. Slowly the sun set amidst a solemn hush of awe, then arose that sonorous voice: ‘Allah! Allah Akbar!’ And, looking up to the high minaret of the old mosque, I saw the Muezzin who proclaimed the hour of prayer.”

“The prolonged chant,” responded Middleton, “seemed mysteriously solemn as the note of summons echoed musically into space.”

“I am told that the Muezzins are all chosen for the beauty of their voices,” Cecil said.

She was turning away towards her tent, when Middleton put out his hand to stop her.

“Please wait a moment, Cecil; I wish to remind you of that time when we were alone together on the ship’s deck. You recollect, as we sat there together in the dusk, I attempted to tell you of my feeling for you. You would not understand—perhaps you thought I had known you but a little while, and that I spoke too soon. Aboard ship, almost as in this desolate wilderness, friendships are quickly formed—and love counts not by time! But you would not listen to me, and I was obliged to leave you hurriedly when I received that urgent

message summoning me home. But I always hoped that we would meet again. Cecil, do you think that you have the heart to hear me now?"

A faint flush rose to Cecil's delicately-tinted cheeks—a flush that Middleton could just discern in the dim light. There was a brief silence, and his heart was beating fast, in his suspense.

"I don't think," she said, reflectively, at last, "I have it in me to love any man. I feel so calm and self-contained—and so unmoved."

"But I have no rival here!" he answered eagerly. "The chances here are mine, and mine alone. I may yet win your heart. At any time a sign from you will recall me gladly to your side."

"How could I ever tell you?" she asked, wonderingly, "if I should change my mind?"

He smiled. "You don't understand what love is, yet," he answered, earnestly. "If once you loved, you would know that it might not be difficult to speak."

"I could never do it!" answered Cecil, with conviction.

"Otherwise, how could I come to you," he suggested, pleadingly, "if I were away?"

"But I might feel afraid that you had changed," Cecil responded doubtfully.

"I shall never change!" he answered, passion-



ately, turning to her, as though he would have clasped her to his heart.

He checked himself suddenly.

“Cecil, you will give me the final word, when we will one day speak of this again together. All roads lead to Rome! And there are many here. Meantime, do not fear that I will worry you.”

“I’m not afraid,” said Cecil, gravely, as she turned to go; “for at least we are good friends.”

“Thank you for saying that!”

Middleton gravely stood aside, that she might pass to her own tent, and when they met again at dinner it was apparently as though this talk had never been.

## CHAPTER IV.

Late one afternoon they drove into a sand-storm. A faint murmuring of distant wind was trembling over the wide emptiness. The few isolated palms looked almost ghost-like in the pale and feeble light that quivered in a cloud of whirling sand. Then a great wind arose, carrying with it innumerable particles of sand, which whirled about the camels, completely blotting out the desert round them.

“Marshallah! There is a bad sand-storm coming up,” said Ibrahim, in Arabic, preparing to dismount and place the caravan, his aba ready in his hand to wrap about his head.

As he spoke, the wind began to roar, and over the desert a thick darkness fell abruptly. It was the clouds of sand from the surrounding dunes, which now came stinging upon their faces.

The Arabs had already placed the party, and each Arab pulled the hood of his burnous over his turban and across his face, covering his mouth with a fold of his haik.

When the storm was over, Ibrahim, who had been smothered in his burnouse, pulled the hood from his eyes, and looked about him. Then he roused the party, telling them gravely they had better pitch the tents and camp there for the night. The Arabs were already throwing back their hoods and uncovering their mouths.

"Mustafa says we may come across some drift sand shortly, after last night's storm," said Middleton to Cecil, as they rode on their way next morning.

By-and-bye they came in sight of a long, thin track of sand, a few hundred yards across, and in the highest places seven or eight feet high. It stretched away as far as they could see.

Ibrahim was consulting anxiously with the other Arabs, and Middleton joined the group.

"Merciful Allah! It is not safe to cross the drift," said Ibrahim.

"Why not?" asked Middleton. "It is only formed of very light and dusty sand. The faintest breeze would send it floating up again upon the air."

"Not an Arab here would venture it. Their fear of drift sand is too great."

"Why do you refuse to cross this drift? It does not appear dangerous."

Ibrahim made some of his men a sign. The Arabs guided their camels to the drift; but when they reached the edge they stopped short, suddenly, displaying great terror, and obstinately refused to venture any further.

“Cease, O, my brothers! Our camels would break their legs if they tried to cross,” said Ibrahim, “and so perish miserably. Behold! they know this, and they snort with fear. And we ourselves would be sucked into it, and die a wretched death of suffocation.”

“Is it likely to remain long settled in one place?” asked Middleton.

“Last night’s wind has brought it here—if wind comes again, perhaps to-day, or to-morrow, it will have disappeared.”

The party rode a long way round to avoid the crossing, and, when they had camped at last, they were thoroughly tired out.

One day, on remounting their dromedaries after a long rest, the fresh wind fell suddenly, and the air became intensely hot. For some time they rode in silence, for the heat created an unusual drowsiness.

“We are having our first real taste of desert heat,” said Middleton, guiding his dromedary to Cecil’s side.

"The monotonous rocking motions of my dromedary increase my weariness and sense of torpor," said Mr. Cleveland, languidly.

"Let us stop for a long rest," suggested Dick.

"I've been told that was tried once for a flagging Literary Club," said Middleton. "It's a certain cure for apathetic members—to suspend club meetings for a year. This, after an irreproachable record of twenty years! But it secured a new and indefinite revival for the club."

"The animals hold on steadily, in spite of the great heat," said Mr. Cleveland; "and the Arabs leading them walk on at the same brisk and even pace, as though they had just started."

"Hark!" said Cecil; "one of them is humming in low tones some simple air!"

"It is their usual monotonous chant," said Middleton.

"It makes one extra drowsy!" Dick complained. "Look! Aunt Seraphina is already visibly and audibly asleep!"

After listening awhile to the Arab's drowsy song, they all relapsed again into silent langour, overcome by heat and torpor. Slowly the little caravan moved on its way, the camel drivers still singing low beneath the folds of their white haiks. Their strange, mysterious Eastern song seemed to

Middleton expressive of great loneliness, and of overpowering solitude in a languorous country of the sun.

The tents had already gone forward when they dismounted for a rest, and they listlessly reclined on rugs spread for them on the sand. The long ride, and the hot desert air made this short rest seem quite luxurious to them.

The Arabs slowly roused themselves to pray, and then sank down to rest again in the drowsy warmth of the sun.

The way was uninteresting and wearisome, so, after another hour in the saddle, it was a relief to reach the luncheon tent, as the heat and total absence of trees to shelter them made lunch in the open air seem almost an impossibility. After nearly three hours' rest, they rode on again, though the heat was still excessive. Two hours' ride over a wearisome plain brought them into camp. They had lunched close to where it was to be pitched, and had prolonged their rest so as to allow the tents to pass on, and be ready for them on arrival.

They travelled more easily next day. At one o'clock they halted under a bank, a little way off their track; the gay Eastern carpets were spread for them, and they partook of a light luncheon here.

"This welcome refreshment makes a fellow feel the desert's quite a cheerful place!" said Dick, as he helped himself to the provisions.

"Look! What is coming, over there?" asked Cecil, shading her eyes with both hands to gaze into the distance. "Lend me your field glasses, please, Uncle James. Something is wrong with mine."

"It's a long train of camels, appearing and disappearing in the distance," said Middleton, as he raised his excellent field-glasses to his eyes. "They are mere specks upon the sky-line."

"How proud and stately they appear, with their long necks and supercilious-looking heads."

The party rested for an hour that day. An hour before sunset they had pitched their tents.

The day following, they rode on till they reached the palms of a sweet oasis they had seen far off. As they rested here, between the palms and acacia trees, they caught glimpses of the desert.

Cecil and Middleton stood side by side in the shade, looking out into the sunshine. Butterflies were flitting through the golden light, and the soft twittering of bird-notes came from the deep shadows of the trees, falling sweetly on their ears. And lizards glided across the warm stones, and rustled into hiding amongst the fallen leaves.



“‘Eloquent of the land where the sun is born!’ expresses this scene exactly,” Cecil said.

“The feathery palms look beautiful against this almost cloudless sky,” said Middleton. “And the blue distances appear like distant seas.”

“Oh! see that bird pass across the wide blue space of sky towards the hills!” breathed Cecil. “It reminds me of a poem that I read long ago—‘Wings of the Morning.’”

“Did you notice those yellow-plumaged birds with crested heads, running swiftly towards the shelter of the scrub?” asked Middleton. “Now one of them is flying low above that bit of level waste.”

“I love the fresh desert breezes, the sand humps, the birds, and flitting yellow butterflies; I love the golden sunlit silence all around—the few light fleecy clouds, moving slowly away, leaving the blue above unflecked with white. These things are like a beautiful unending poem to me,” said Cecil, dreamily.

“Music and poetry, especially, are for emotional souls,” said Middleton. “Sometimes I think regretfully that I have wasted ability and time in the number and variety of my pursuits, when I might have concentrated all my energies on one. And yet, the time was not altogether thrown

away—for all that I have learnt seems capable of being applied somehow to whatever I have in hand.”

“Nothing can stand still, I think,” said Cecil; “there is bound to be in life the reverse swing of the pendulum—it must either go back or forward—retire or proceed.”

“Do you remember much of the good things you have read?”

“My mind is full of odds and ends of literature,” answered Cecil. “This wonderful thing that we term Memory is like a phonograph—once spoken into, the sounds will often come to us again.”

“Memory is like a plastic tablet of white stone,” said Middleton; “where the impressions harden and remain for ever!”

“Yet it is impalpable, mysterious, often fleeting as a dream—and as intangible!”

“At moments, strong and clear,” said Middleton; “but, at times, if we attempt to grasp it, it eludes our eager hold, and it is gone! It is mere phantasy—mere memory of memories.”

“Let us interpret to each other what we can remember of our past. I pause to listen; and I hear in memory the sounds I used to love. The voices of dear friends; the music I have cared for; snatches of poetry!”

“In my childhood, the old country sounds,”

said Middleton. "The funny gobble of the turkey-cocks; the noisy cackle of the speckled hens; the morning cries of the impatient calves, and the plaintive lowing of their mothers, from the milking sheds. The bleating of the lambs; the eager barking of the dog; the gentle cooing of the happy pigeons, and the ring-doves in their cote. The mew of a pet kitten, as it ran to my feet."

"The song of birds," said Cecil; "the warble of canaries as I passed; the swelling music of the organ in our dear old country church; and the fresh, sweet voices of the children, singing hymns. These are phantoms of the old loved sounds I used to hear."

"What of phantom pictures of the things we used to see?"

"Ah! these are grasped more readily."

"A blue sky, flecked with fleecy clouds, driven gently onwards by a faint breeze that softly fanned one's cheeks, and stirred one's hair. The sweet-scented flowers in the old-fashioned garden of my home. Wild strawberries and ripe bramble berries, and the wild, scentless violets I and my brother gathered in the wood, where we wandered in absorbed, unspeakable content. And I recollect the rare keen pleasure that the gathering of yellow buttercups and daisies in the meadows gave me then."

"Memories of books," suggested Cecil. "How enthralled was I in that vast, wonderful, strange world they opened to me, and to which they were the key. A boundless immensity of space, stretching far away into unknown country, beyond most distant horizons."

"These vast woods and forests have dwindled away since into small compass," said Middleton, thoughtfully. "The marvellous romances, and the strong reality of characters they conjured up for me, have been swept away now by the commonplace. The griefs that were my griefs, the joys that were my own! The heroes and the heroines that claimed my ardent sympathy in all they did and said, and suffered, as I hung enthralled above my book, exist no more for me as in their ancient, strong reality."

"But though we have lost something," Cecil said, "I know we have gained more. For now it is the writers of the books themselves, the souls behind the pen, that speak to us. They appeal to our matured mind, as the tales alone appealed to us before. This have we in gain to compensate us for our loss—though that was great. The vivid imaginings, the fresh impressions, and the strong realities of childhood, are grown into something nearer, something dearer, and more real, intense—though not more tangible."

"I can never return to my old favourites," said Middleton.

"I have indeed outgrown my Proctor, my Evangeline, my Goldsmith," answered Cecil; "perhaps because I clung too closely to them once. But that which I had feared was dead and lost to me lives again now in the Rubaiyat and Shakespeare. And all the cherished passages I garnered from my earliest readings, I may still retain. In the deep recesses of my memory are they for ever stored; and when they come to light, I feel the purest, deepest, and most perfect joy that any soul can know. Such moments are exquisite!"

"Memories of friends and sounds, summed up," said Middleton; "memories of past scenes, and memories of books. Surely memory is our most precious gift in life! And, with the Haunted Man in Dickens' 'Christmas Books,' we still may pray, 'Lord, keep my memory green!'"

In thoughtful silence, yet at one with one another, they turned presently to rejoin their party.

When they went on again, the heat of the sun grew more intense, and the breeze had dropped in the treeless waste. By-and-bye they came upon a village, and a little crowd of Arab children outside it scattered from before the caravan. Arabs in white or blue or earth-coloured robes stood still and stared upon them as they passed.

“As a long ride is before us on the morrow, O, my masters,” said Ibrahim that evening, “we must be up early, with the rising of the sun, have breakfast, and be off.”

So, after sundown, they dined leisurely outside their tent, and as soon as it got dark they went to bed.

“The nights are refreshing and cool, after the unsparing heat of the days,” said Cecil, as she and her aunt were retiring to their tent.

“Yes, indeed,” replied Miss Seraphina. “I can bear a thick coverlet over me, and be quite thankful for it. And my insomnia has been quite cured since I have travelled in the desert!”

“Women are fearfully and wonderfully made!” said Dick. “But I’ve never quite believed in that insomnia, if I may trust the evidence of my own ears at night.”

“No matter at what hour we may arrive at an Arab camp or village,” said Cecil, “at midnight, early morning, or mid-day, we never seem to be unwelcome visitors amongst the Arabs.”

“Yes,” said Dick; “their sense of hospitality is truly beautiful. It is unfailing ever!”

“And the desert Arabs never ask for back-sheesh.”

“At any time,” said Mr. Cleveland, “the sheikh will arise, turn out his wives and children, have their apartment swept, re-arranged, re-carpeted, for us, and give us coffee whilst our animals are being tended.”

“As for the sweeping,” added Dick, “well, the less we say of that the better!”

“‘Who sweeps a room, as for the laws, makes that and the action fine,’ can’t be applied to them!” said Middleton.

“Amongst the Arabs here,” said Dick, “the action isn’t fine—nor is the apartment swept as for the laws! George Herbert’d turn in his grave if he could only see some of the sweeping!”

“But the people always wish us a hearty ‘sa-laama’ as we leave the village,” said Mr. Cleveland. “Their sense of hospitality makes full amends for much else that is lacking.”

Next morning, as they were emerging from a rocky gorge out on a wide plain, they found it to be thickly covered in many places with long dry grass and small aromatic shrubs. Herds of graceful gazelles, lowering their heads, swept galloping across their path, and the two women looked after them with admiring interest.

The weather was always delightful in the early morning, but even then it was too hot, had it not

been for a cool breeze. When the heat was great, they rode for three hours only, in the early morning; they had a long rest for lunch, sometimes passed a caravan, or stopped at a small village; then, after another hour's ride, they were in camp again.

A knot of palm trees usually marked the site of a village or a well; and there was more of coarse reed or camel grass growing there in patches. They might have been in the heart of the Sahara, for the huts were primitive and mud-built. The sheikh's house was mud-built like the rest, and at the door the sheikh would come forth to welcome them.

By-and-bye the sight of a distant oasis gave them promise of water and shade. The tired camels stepped out more briskly, stretching their long necks forward as they went. They all hurried their steps towards this welcome oasis in the desert. The camels were tethered, the Arabs placed sleeping mats for the women in the delicious shade of palms; the men grouped themselves around, sitting on the short grass beneath the palms, mimosa, and acacia trees; and the whole party threw themselves down gratefully upon the turf, where the transparent stream purled forth from the shadows, disappearing in the sand beneath their feet. And under the shady palms, the men of the desert, with



their sun-browned faces, and keen, bold eyes, turned towards Mecca, gravely bowed their heads in prayer.

## CHAPTER V.

“Mirage of the desert!” Cecil exclaimed, as she laid down her book. “How often have I wished to see the mirage I have heard about!”

Middleton turned instantly to glance at her.

“Perhaps we shall see mirage here together—you and I”—he said, in tones intended only for her ear.

The others were all deep in their occupations, for they were pausing for the Sunday rest.

Middleton was smoking, thinking, and enjoying the quiet. Dick was fast asleep. Mr. Cleveland was busily engaged in sorting his specimens, and Miss Seraphina was writing up her voluminous diary. Cecil, who had been absorbed in reading, had looked up suddenly from her book to speak to Middleton.

The Day of Rest came pleasantly to all. Sunday morning, instead of being one of disturbance and of noisy packing, was of unusual quiet. Instead of the cries of Arabs, and the shrill protests of camels, there was silence, broken only by an occa-

sional low voice, or a chance footfall on the sand near to the tents.

How much appreciated was that day of quiet! The camels were all gone off to graze upon the shrubs; the Arabs lay comfortably asleep amongst their scattered baggage; no sound of the busy world broke the great silence of the wilderness. And they remained quietly in their tents, and felt at home!

Middleton rose presently, and stretched himself lazily.

"Let us go for a quiet stroll together on the plain," he said, approaching Cecil.

She rose at once, and got her sheltering hat and veil, and white umbrella, and they passed out together through the encircling encampment. They walked forth side by side upon the wild, free desert. The camels were out of sight, hidden behind some sandhills, browsing on the desert scrub. Not a living thing beside themselves was moving on all the surface of the undulating plain, which, before and behind, seemed to stretch away into boundless space.

"Well," said Middleton at last, "here we are, in full Africa—no civilisation here to trouble us. You would scarcely find anything wilder between here and Timbuctoo!"

He was silent for a little, lost in thought.

"Do you ever feel a painful sense of loneliness, of overwhelming isolation, out upon the desert?" he asked, suddenly.

"To me it seems unspeakably restful rather," she responded. "This grand expanse is absolutely roadless, peaceful, silent!— And the pure air is soft and light upon one's face!"

"This limitless expanse," he said, "of stone and sand, "is as old as the world itself. If we could only understand, every atom here could tell us wonderful tales about the past. I wish I had a sand-diviner here to tell me something I would like to know. Misty and silent, the desert brings sad thoughts to me!"

"Why so?" asked Cecil gently, gazing at him with wondering interest.

"Because I have a feeling we are in the Land of Unknown Kismet," he responded, uttering aloud his inmost thought.

Over the desert an occasional slight misty film of vapour showed itself, for the day was hot.

"Do you believe in mirage?" asked Cecil softly, looking at the vapour. "Do you believe that it means anything?"

"Yes, I almost think I do," he answered slowly, looking dreamily before him. "We're at the edge

of an oasis, looking even now towards a faint idea of mirage.”

Cecil held out her hand towards the slight shimmering haze, which was now like a veil of finest gauze before their eyes.

“I don’t mean what we see there,” she said. “I mean the fabled mirage of the desert. Is it possible? Does it exist? Can it show us beautiful landscapes, living pictures—can it be entered into—or can the phantom figures issue out of it?”

Middleton was looking slowly round the silent plain, encircling them, but for a moment, he did not respond. Then he turned to her, and led her to a solitary palm tree, where they paused, and sat down side by side beneath its welcome shade.

“I have been told that in mirage the objects that one thinks one sees often appear multiplied—but I’ve seen the mirage of the desert with one solitary figure.”

Cecil turned to him with genuine surprise and interest.

“I did not know,” she said, “that you had ever seen the mirage of the desert!”

“I had often heard about the usual kind,” said Middleton. “The shimmering vapour on a vast and wide plain of blue, white, red, yellow, green, and of haze. And pictures therein, sometimes of

phantom palaces, and water, many trees, and men!”

He sat silent, pondering.

“But I have actually seen one, too! Let me tell you my story now,” he said impulsively; “the one I said that I would tell you—out upon the desert!”

Cecil had turned eagerly and quickly to him. With a dreamy gaze, he looked straight out before him at the desert, and presently began:—

“A picture rises before my mental view, of what is past—I will interpret to you what I see.

“An old man lies dying in a luxuriously-furnished bedroom in a large and handsome London house. A young man, his son, sits by the bedside, bending forward, his chin resting in his hands, absorbed in watching him. The old man suddenly opens his heavy eyes, and turns to him:

“ ‘John, I believe your brother is still living!’

“ ‘My brother—Arthur?’

“ ‘Yes. I know that you have long believed him to be dead.’

“ ‘I understood, from you, he left his home, at his own wish, to go abroad; and that he died there several years ago.’

“ ‘I’ve never told you the real truth of that. I have received no proof that he is dead.’

“ ‘Tell me, father, why Arthur left home?’

“ ‘I drove him from it with my cruel words! He was delicately nurtured, like his mother. I was unjust to him, on your behalf, for you took after my side of the family. I loved you best. I resented Arthur’s being the elder of my sons, for I felt that he robbed you. He lived wrapped up in a studious life, in dreams of his own making. Stung by my bitterness, and my injustice, from his dreams, he left his home.’

“ ‘How can we find Arthur now? Can you give me no clue?’

“ ‘John—I leave to you, my favourite son, the hard legacy of finding him. You are still to me the best and dearest of my sons. I would gladly have robbed Arthur of his rights as eldest, had it lain in my power, in order that I might bestow them on yourself.’

“ ‘But the property belongs to him,’ the young man answered faintly, greatly troubled; ‘it is his by right of birth.’

“ ‘Search for him until you find him, John, and bring your brother home again—if possible, before I die!’

“The old man suddenly half rises in his bed, stretching forth his hands appealingly to the young man. He catches his son’s fingers in a nervous clasp. Then, sinking back again, he closes his heavy

eyes once more, and seems to sleep, still clasping his son's hand closely in his own.

“The young man sits there motionless awhile. Then a strange sensation, as of strong mesmeric influence, sweeps over him. It is as though he sees the vision that is floating in the dying man's mind—as though the dying man had gained some marvellous gift of second sight, and the additional power of passing it on to him. He may perhaps but doze and dream, for he is quite worn out with constant watching by the sick man's side. But still, he seems to see within his father's mind, and to grasp a vision there!

“Upon the blank space of the wall comes floating presently a silvery haze; an opal-coloured, trembling veil. Then suddenly this opens out into a wide, clear space upon a desert; and he gazes wonderingly far away across the golden sand—gazes over a sunlit, shimmering waste, where, beyond the palms of an oasis, within a kind of film, a misty, quivering light, is coming mirage, as yet enshrouded in this mysterious and floating veil of haze. Then this settles slowly, growing almost motionless, as a picture forms itself before him. And he knows he sees the mirage of the desert!

“And now he sees a figure in white turban, and white flowing robes, the form of a dignified



Arab sheikh, mounted upon a snow-white Arab mare of purest desert breed, standing motionless beneath a palm tree. And as he turns his face towards the man who is breathlessly watching him, the latter knows it for his long-lost brother's face, grown grave, and worn, and sad—all the old delicate and blithesome beauty gone from it for ever; but with a certain look of dignity and intellectual strength that its old early sweetness had never worn. It strikes him vaguely that it is an expression of spiritual abnegation and of exaltation. Yes! It is Arthur's face—although his form is clothed in this strange garb. And he is alone and waiting—an expectant look upon his face, a look of infinite and gentle patience—a look of patient waiting—but no hope.

“‘Arthur!’ the young man watching cries, impulsively.

“As he cries out the mirage slowly fades, as though the spell were broken—the desert slowly fades away from view, and the watcher seems to wake as from a dream.

“‘Father!’ he cries aloud.

“And then again, in agitation—‘Father!’

“But the old man answers not, nor does he unclothe his eyes again. His son bends over him. No breath issues from the pallid lips, or stirs the soft white hair. The father has passed away in his

son's brief sleep—if sleep it were. That son bends over him again.

“ ‘Father!’ he says solemnly, as though the dead could hear; ‘I’ve surely seen my brother—he is living still, indeed—you bade me search for him—hear my promise, now, that I will seek him till I find him, though it cost me half my life!’

“ ‘A land in the Far East’ ”—mused Middleton, dreamily—“surely my quest lay in an Eastern land—for the figure in the mirage stood beneath a palm tree, with a vast and misty desert stretching all around, in its great immensity of empty space. Yes, my quest lies in the wind-swept desert!”

Middleton broke off abruptly, turning to the girl who stood beside him, with an eager look on his bronzed face.

“Cecil, do you understand, my missing brother is my quest?”

And Cecil, with a dawning look of feeling, answered softly:

“Yes—I understand.”

“Thank you for hearing me so patiently,” said Middleton, presently. “This time that we have been together in the desert has been to me the happiest time of my life.”

Cecil, sitting at his side, with drooping eyelids, answered nothing. Middleton longed to tell her

what was in his heart, but did not dare, lest he might break the spell. For never yet had he seen Cecil quite like this—so soft, so infinitely dear and sweet—though she was always charming and lovable. But now she seemed to possess some new-born strength of charm, and the subtle, inner meaning of it, he knew not.

“Cecil,” he said softly, almost trembling, as he bent towards her; “are you happy? Tell me—dear!”

Cecil raised her eyes to his; then, with a deepened colour, turned her face away towards the desert.

She suddenly exclaimed, in awestruck tones:—

“Truly are we in the Land of Kismet!—Look!”

As they both rose to their feet, she turned to him, and pointed to the distant desert with her hand.

“Look over there!” she said again—“it is the mirage!”

They saw the grey, calm water of a visionary lagoon; palm-trees standing in it, their trunks laved by it gently. On its limpid surface, here and there, were lovely little islands.

The trembling, quivering haze seemed moving nearer to them. They held their breath in awe as they gazed at it. And they saw wondrous marble

palaces appear, and many trees reflected in the water.

This faded; and they gazed across a vast, wide plain of shimmering haze, of dazzling, quivering mirage. And as they looked, the figure of an Arab sheikh, in white haik and turban, and flowing white robes, mounted upon a snow-white mare of purest Arab breed, was riding slowly into it, away from them. Whence came he? Whither was he going? He still rode quietly on, and disappeared in mirage—dazzling haze! He had the air of a dream figure in a dream. He seemed part of the mirage that he vanished into.

“What can this mean?” breathed Cecil, as she stood by Middleton, lost in amaze.

“We see mirage of the desert, Cecil, you and I,” he answered. “And it is even as I saw it in my vision—but my brother’s face was turned the other way! I fear that only in deceptive dreams of mirage will he appear to me once more!”

“Mirage is within us,” she said, softly, “even as it is far off before us in the desert! I believe that mirage mesmerises our imagination—I believe that it suggests to us strange visions.”

Above them was a sky of faintest blue, with white clouds slowly travelling towards the East. And, as Cecil spoke, a cool wind blew; the quivering

haze broke up—and lo! there was no horseman riding there—they were alone together on the silent, boundless plain!

## CHAPTER VI.

The whole of Sunday had been most quiet and peaceful. The day following, all was reversed, and the usual noise and bustle of packing recommenced.

They had a trying journey, and determined to pitch camp early, as all of them were thoroughly tired out. By the time the camp was pitched twilight was falling. Wind was also rising, and soon there was a strong breeze, in which myriads of minute sand-grains danced. It was a chilly evening, but a charcoal fire soon cheered and warmed the tent within, and a little later some excellently-made hot coffee was brought to them.

During the night it blew hard, increasing to a gale. It was too wet to strike camp next day, but they determined to pass the hours pleasantly. The wind had sunk; they could no longer hear it roaring over the desert. And in the tents they were all snug and warm.

“It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good!” said Dick; “I, for one, am enjoying this immensely.”

"I am thinking of writing my autobiography," announced Miss Seraphina. "Only think, how well these experiences would come in. My diary is already valuable!"

"The worst of it," said Dick, "is that the only people who are interested in us are ourselves. And you can't tell us much about yourself that we don't know already."

"I hope I shall soon have an opportunity of studying the Arab women," observed Miss Seraphina, ignoring Dick's remark.

"Why do the Arabs believe that their women possess no souls, and that they have no chance of going to Paradise?" said Dick to Middleton. "It seems to me to be a heartless kind of doctrine. I wonder whether this belief of theirs is bound to affect the ultimate destiny of the Arab ladies?"

"It has indeed been their belief from time immemorial," said Mr. Cleveland.

"Of course, the Arab women have no souls!" Miss Seraphina said. "They haven't been educated up to having souls, so how can they possess them? And, how can they possibly enter Paradise without them?"

"Ah! that remark, made by a woman, appears to throw more than a little light upon the matter, to my thinking," said Dick, reflectively.

“We have religious tenets and convictions, and mean well.”

“Oh, these religious tenets and convictions, and this meaning well,” said Dick, disdainfully.

“I recollect a conversation between a bigoted Presbyterian and his friend,” said Middleton. ‘So you won’t have Patrick in your service?’ said the latter. You’ve rejected suddenly a man who appeared at first to give you satisfaction. What may be the reason of your present disapproval?’ ‘I have rejected him because he’s a Roman Catholic.’ ‘He is an excellent servant—he understands his duties thoroughly? Is he not sober, honest, of unimpeachable integrity?’ ‘He is all you say,’ returned the other. ‘Still, the fact remains that he’s a Roman Catholic. I cannot take Roman Catholics into my service.’ ‘Have you anything to say against his character?’ ‘No, nothing—absolutely nothing,’ said the other, hastily. ‘Then I must say I think you’re extremely bigoted,’ returned his friend. ‘You admit that Patrick is a valuable servant, and you’ve nothing to say against his character—yet you reject the man because his religious convictions are different from your own. I suppose that you want everyone to think in your own way?’ ”

“Well, wild horses couldn’t alter my opinions to suit anybody else,” declared Miss Scrapina.



“Wild horses have never been tried,” responded Dick, “so how can you tell?”

“I could bear them like the Spartan boy,” returned Miss Seraphina.

“Like the Spartan idiot!” said Dick. “Besides, he hadn’t wild horses, but a fox to worry him.”

“Miss Aurora Smith, on board the ‘Victoria,’ struck me as being an extremely modest lady,” said Mr. Cleveland, breaking in upon the conversation.

“I’m not so sure of that!” said Dick. “Her vanity was unsurpassable. And as for temper, I’ve known the sun to set upon her wrath. Her friends were like relays of post horses all along the road. The ones she leaves behind her at the stopping places, so to speak, she never takes up again. There was Mrs. Peterkin, a friend she made ’board ship. At first they swore eternal friendship—then discord began. One afternoon the ladies had been ashore at a port we were stopping at. On returning to the ship they entered the saloon, and asked for tea. Aurora took off her much befeathered hat, and placed it on a seat, and Mrs. Peterkin sat down without observing it. She said afterwards that she mistook it for a cushion. Aurora didn’t say much to her, but her looks were unutterable; and I was

pained by overhearing what she said to Mrs. Green about her afterwards."

"This talk about best hats and feathers makes me feel quite homesick for the latest fashions," said Miss Seraphina, pensively. "I could almost wish we had some shops here on the desert. I should enjoy a short run home to London, and an hour's shopping!"

"The weas' always wants to be where it is not," observed Dick, cheerfully. "It'll cross the water to get over to the other side—and then when it is there, it wants to cross again, to get back to where it started from. I see now we've been contented here because we thought we could return at any time, according to our own sweet will."

"Are you in pain, Miss Smythe?" asked Middleton, sympathetically.

"I have toothache," said Miss Seraphina, plaintively.

"Smile on a woman, and she'll tell you all her troubles!" Dick exclaimed.

"I should like to see a dentist," said his aunt. "Why are there no dentists in the desert?"

"They'd be so useful here!" said Dick. "Their practice'd be immense! Try the Imagination Cure. Let Mustafa approach with pincers, and imagine he's a dentist, and the pain will leave you. I don't

speaking without some knowledge of the matter. I once saw a man sitting on the steps of a dentist's offices in London. When I passed there some hours later, he was still sitting on the steps. In answer to my question, he said he had an aching tooth, and that this was the only place where he got rest."

"Why didn't he have it out?" asked Middleton.

"Because the pain got better when he got to the dentist's door!"

"All this nonsense does not ease my suffering!" his aunt said, petulantly.

"To endure calamities with patience is the mark of a valiant mind," said Dick.

"Everyone can bear the toothache but he that has it," murmured Middleton.

"There never was a philosopher who could endure the toothache patiently," said Dick. "However bad things are, look on the bright side; be cheerful, and don't worry!"

"I wish I was dead!" returned Miss Seraphina, bitterly.

"Don't say you wish you were dead! Think of the bright and happy future yet in store for you. When the time came, how grieved you'd be that you were not there to enjoy it!"

"I wonder if Morocco is like Algiers?" said Cecil.

"I have been told by an old traveller that the city is now mere crumbling ruins," said Mr. Cleveland. "He told me it had fallen again, and that it is now but a great straggling and half-ruined town."

"What part of it is Fez?"

"Fez is the most important town of the whole empire of Morocco."

"Can you describe Morocco?"

"My travelling acquaintance told me it is walled by high, strong walls, like most Oriental towns. He said: 'One passes through a dark gateway in mud walls, and along dark, narrow walls of sand-strewn, silent streets, where there are crumbling ruins of houses on each side. Outside the city one enters at once on open country. There are high-walled villages and enclosed gardens.'"

"I've heard of celebrated palm groves there," said Middleton. "Can you tell us anything about them?"

"I believe there are many miles of palm-trees. Everywhere the air hangs heavy with the odour of the ripe dates in these beautiful, sweet-scented groves."

“Had this traveller ever wandered on the mountains near Morocco?”

“No. He said the mountains were forbidden ground to travellers, because of wild hordes of robbers there.”

“I have the notion that the Moors are a very learned people,” Cecil said.

“They were so, once. Now they are scarcely better than savages,” said Mr. Cleveland.

“I propose we all do something to amuse each other,” suggested Middleton. “Each one must contribute their share to the common entertainment.”

“I could sing very well if I’d a voice,” said Dick. “As I can’t sing, I will recite for you!”

So Cecil sang some of her most charming songs; Dick recited to them in his most heroic fashion; and Middleton and Mr. Cleveland told some of their best stories of adventure.

By-and-bye they got Mustafa in; they had discovered he was a born story-teller of the East; and Middleton translated his Arabic into English for the benefit of the rest.

Then they started singing glees. The merry songs within the little tent, having the accompaniment of pouring rain beating on the canvas walls outside.

## CHAPTER VII.

A bright morning made the desert cheerful, and soon the little caravan was once more en route.

There was a peculiar dazzle in the air.

"It is not with heat," said Middleton, perplexedly, "yet the air seems to be swimming."

As they went on, a fiery breath of hot wind passed by, meeting them from the East.

"It came suddenly; a glowing blast which seemed to scorch my face as it went by," said Middleton.

"Is this the breath of the Khamseen?" asked Mr. Cleveland. "I have heard something of the horrors of the Khamseen!"

"It may perhaps be a forerunner of the dreaded Simoon!" said Middleton, anxiously.

"That hot wind does not return, however," Cecil said.

"That blast came to us straight from the Infernal Regions of the Arabs!" Dick exclaimed.

"It has gone on its wild way, and it returns to us no more," said Mr. Cleveland.

Middleton, who had turned back to speak with the Arabs, now rejoined them.

“The Arabs say that a change is certainly approaching in the weather.”

“Then the curious swimming in the air, and that hot gust, are the almost certain precursors of a Khamseen wind?” asked Mr. Cleveland.

“That is the land wind, is it not?” asked Cecil.

“Yes. It comes warm and heavy, laden with finest particles of sand. We were bound to experience it some time on our journey.”

Suddenly a strong wind swept over them in a gust; the Arabs talked again of a Khamseen. That terror of travellers was certainly at hand. It was increasing each half-hour, as they toiled on their way. It had now filled the air with sand, and they could only see each other distinctly at a few yards' distance.

Ibrahim, as usual, led the way, and the whole party, afraid of straying from the track, followed in single file. Around them was the sand-storm, and then they entered among the low, dark sand-hills. Only the roaring of the dreaded Khamseen could be heard amongst the hollows. Everyone was busy wrapping up their head from the fine, penetrating sand.

Then a flash of lightning broke through the gathering gloom, and a peal of thunder burst over their heads; in another minute rain began to fall in heavy drops, and then it poured with the fierce downpour of the rare but terrible storm of the desert.

The wind fell a little as the rain increased, and their baggage and the Arabs were all huddled up under shelter of the tent, half up. Every man had to hold on to it to keep it from being blown over, or away altogether.

The gusts ceased by degrees, the rain stopped, the Arabs threw back their hoods, which had been drawn over their heads; a fresh place was found for the tent, and soon cheerful lights were burning in them. Then carpets and mats were spread; and by-and-bye Mustafa brought them freshly-made, hot coffee.

“Could there be a worse storm than we had to-day?” asked Cecil, as she received her welcome cup of coffee.

“I’ve heard of one,” said Middleton, “when the caravan had to lie down, man and beast, until the storm was over.”

“We have so many damp articles to dry, that we will be unable to start before mid-day to-morrow,” Mr. Cleveland said, with some annoyance.



“My bag’s had a big hole jagged in it,” said Dick, ruefully, approaching them. “It reminds me of Uncle Benjamin and his new Gladstone bag. I don’t know what strange freak made him buy it, for he never went from home; and he had put it carefully away on a high shelf. He suddenly decided he would go away for a week’s holiday. When he began to pack, he could not find his nice new Gladstone bag. ‘Your Gladstone bag?’ said Aunt Selina; ‘well, as you never used it, I’ve been lending it about amongst your friends.’ ‘You’d no right to lend it,’ Uncle Ben. said, wrathfully. ‘I got the bag to go away with for a trip.’ ‘You?’ said Aunt Selina, scornfully; ‘why, what’s the good of your having anything to go away with for a trip. You root yourself in one place. You’re a dead fixture here. There’d be a mighty upheaval and a great uprooting if you tried to stir. Don’t be a dog in the manger, Benjamin! You’d never have used that Gladstone bag yourself!’ ‘Don’t talk so much,’ he said. I object to women’s talk on principle—talking makes more talk. It’s like perpetual drops of water wearing stone away. Drop! drop! drop! Although one may despise it, it’s enough to drive one mad! And anyway, this time I’m really going from home!’ ‘So you’ve often told me, Benjamin. This time I’ll have you drugged and bundled off

up-country for your long-put-off-and-greatly-needed-holiday.' 'Who'd do the packing for me, pray, if I were drugged?' 'You, yourself!' quoth Aunt Selina, sharply, 'before we drugged you. Young Mr. Calvert has your bag just now. You'll get it back to-night.' That same evening a shabby and dilapidated leather bag was brought to Unele Ben. with Mr. Calvert's compliments and thanks; and it had been most serviceable. I thought so, too, when I saw the big hole that had been jagged in it where it had been roughly hauled over an old tree-stump on a shooting trip. Unele Ben. had to pay a country saddler half-a-crown to put a clumsy patch on it."

A week later the travellers had experience of a sand-storm, with the proverbial "devils" of the desert. After seven or eight o'clock in the morning the sun was very powerful, and during the greater portion of the day clouds of dust and columns of sand were frequently swept across the plain like large water-spouts. One day about noon, one of these columns of dark, red sand, coming up with amazing rapidity, turning and twisting in whirlwind, seized their tent with great violence; the tent-pegs were drawn, the ropes flew about, and in a moment the tent was whirled around, turned inside out like an umbrella in a storm, and everything

capsized. Ibrahim clung fast to the centre-pole of the tent, and after a hard struggle the Arabs brought the tent to ground again, and the whirlwind had passed by.

“The tents are sandy,” Dick complained; “the camels are very sandy; we’re all covered with sand, and our eyes are full of sand! I know now thoroughly what a sand-storm may be like.”

They stopped here for a couple of days, for it was cold, with high wind and heavy rain till afternoon. They drank hot tea and coffee, to keep warm.

The old dragoman had told them that a well-known sheikh named Ahmed Bey had his village a few days’ journey further on, and they determined on a visit there.

One evening, after dinner, they all sat round the great camp fires and told strange tales of adventure to each other. Where a large group of Arabs sat round their fire, there was unusual earnestness upon the story-teller’s part, and the Arabs were intently hearkening to him, absorbed in interest. For he was unusually vivid, even brilliant, in narration, apt in gesture, a born story-teller of the East; and he held his little audience enchained.

Middleton approached, and stood behind the

group, and hearkened with them. Just then, an Arab threw fresh brushwood on the fire, and he could see the story-teller's face.

It was Mustafa, who was relating in Arabic some story of an alien stranger, who, long before, had arrived amongst the Arabs of the desert.

“Mysteriously he appeared amongst them, riding a white camel,” said Mustafa. “He wore white haik and turban, and flowing white Arab robes, which streamed upon the wind. On his hand he wore a ring, in which was set a strange and unknown stone, engraved with unknown characters, and to which the Arabs afterwards attributed mysterious potency. And the old sheikh of the tribe looked upon the stranger with affection, and received him as a son, for he had only daughters, Allah having denied him sons. He loved him well, and gave him place, and power, and honour in his tribe. Then, one day, finding himself about to depart on the far journey, he said unto the Arabs:—‘Let me depart in peace. I have no son of mine own blood—Lo! here is my successor. Surely his coming hither hath been a sign from Allah. Accept this stranger, whom I love, even as thy sheikh of sheikhs—lest the sons of Sheitan peradventure may return again to smite ye.’

“And the old shiekh prevailed amongst the

Arabs. Therefore, when he died, the stranger ruled his douar in his stead, as his successor; because the sheikh had left behind no son. And the Arabs have a superstitious reverence for him, holding him in awe, because they think he is descended from Mahomet, Allah's Prophet, and sent here to the desert to guide His chosen people unto Paradise.

“He is also a great Prophet in the Sahara desert, far and near. And all of Arab blood attribute to him strange, mysterious power, owing, partly, to the unknown strange gem he wears upon his finger. And they say he can divine the future in it, as the sand-diviner can divine the future in the countless grains of sand. And never yet hath he been seen without it; therefore must it verily be some ancient talisman and charm.

“And he hath now great power, and an unlimited control amongst the desert tribes—even to the farthest corners of the desert—his sway extendeth everywhere. For many are his messengers, from the far parts of the desert, and he knoweth all. He is All-powerful. He controls his people—yet is he seldom seen of men. When the light of his countenance falls sometimes on them, lo! then do his people tremble, stricken by their fear. And his name amongst the People of the Desert is ‘The Great Solitary One’; because he is so seldom seen of men;

and, moreover, he hath taken unto him no wife, and hath no children round him, but he dwells alone."

As Mustafa related this story of the mysterious solitary sheikh, with his bronzed countenance so earnest as he spoke, and the other Arabs with their quiet, impassive faces, all intent upon the story, lying round in every posture in the firelight, Middleton could have fancied he was living in a mystic story of the old Arabian Nights.

"We will make a journey to the douar of this great sheikh," said Middleton, to the assembled Arabs, as Mustafa ceased. "For greatly should I like to make acquaintance with the sheikh of all the sheikhs."

The chorus of reclining Arabs near the fire rose in a low murmur of approval.

Next morning they rose early. Ibrahim was already sitting at the open door of his own tent, enjoying the pure freshness of the early morning before the heat became great; watching his men loading the camels for the day's journey.

A little before noon they were passing a fold in the sandhills; and on the crest of one of these hills they perceived a distant figure. As the caravan approached, they could see a mounted Arab coming towards them, as though to reconnoitre,

shaking his great spear. He wheeled round suddenly and disappeared behind the sandhill, and they saw him no more.

The vast plain stretched away before them level as a sea. They journeyed drowsily upon their dromedaries beneath a blazing sun.

At the mid-day halt Middleton was walking apart from the rest, when he became aware of a shadow suddenly falling upon him. Turning, he perceived a dromedary bearing down upon him swiftly, its sponge-like hoofs making so little noise on the soft sand that he had not heard it coming. On the back of the dromedary sat a black-bearded swarthy Arab. The Arab stopped his dromedary, commanded it to kneel, slipped down from the saddle, and spoke to Ibrahim.

“What is thy name, thy business here, and what do ye desire?”

“We wish to visit the tents of Ahmed Bey,” said Ibrahim. “Wilt thou guide us there?”

Muttering something in his beard, the Arab remounted, and guided his dromedary towards him.

“I am Ghudda. I belong to the house of Ahmed Bey, the sheikh of yonder douar. And I will guide ye to him.”

He pointed to the distance as he spoke.

The luncheon tent was then struck and loaded,

along with the piled-up luggage, on the camels, and within half an hour the procession was moving onward. When they had gone some distance, Ibrahim who was in advance, turned back, and announced in a troubled voice, that a band of mounted men was advancing upon them. Suddenly, without any sound beyond the soft beat of the unshod hoofs in the sand, a band of about a dozen riders came tearing out from amongst the sandhills at a wild gallop.

The eager black eyes of all these Arabs were unusually bright and keen. They wore loose white burnouses, and shrouding white headgear half concealed their swarthy, bearded faces.

After a hurried word apart with Ghudda they wheeled and galloped off again, leaving the caravan to proceed upon its way.



## CHAPTER VIII.

At length the travellers came in sight of a distant Arab douar. As they approached, the hush was broken by a sound of many voices, and the barking of dogs.

"The village appears to be quite close at hand," said Cecil.

"But we ride on for a long time without seeming to get any nearer," Dick complained.

"A horseman is now rapidly approaching us," said Middleton. "He appears to be an Arab, riding at full speed."

"On he comes, lance in hand. Is he friend or foe, I wonder?" Cecil said, a little anxiously.

"See," said Middleton, "as he nears us he reverses his lance, so that the butt is advanced towards us instead of the point."

"What does that mean?" asked Dick.

"It is the Arab sign of peace and welcome."

As he drew near, the horseman spoke to Ibrahim in his own tongue, and told him he came straight from the tents of Ahmed Bay.

“Wilt thou conduct us there?” asked Ibrahim.

“I will do so. We have had word of thy coming. I am come to meet ye, and to guide thy party thither. Tarry here yet a little while with Ghudda, whilst I go back to Ahmed Bey to tell him ye have arrived.”

He galloped back to the tents, and soon returned again. Ibrahim now turned to Mr. Cleveland to interpret the Arab's words to him.

“This horseman tells us Ahmed Bey is unavoidably detained in camp; but he hath sent two kinsmen to meet us and conduct us to his tent.”

Soon they were met by the sheikh's kinsmen, who conducted them to the village. The younger of the two Arabs rode straight up to the sheikh's house. There was a slight stir and movement amongst the people round. A large and powerfully-made Arab was seen to issue forth, and to jump on the back of a mare, and ride forward to meet the party.

The sheikh rode up to them, and asked if they had peace.

“Those who bring peace, find it,” added he.

“We bring peace,” said Ibrahim, answering for the party.

Whereupon they exchanged salutations gravely,

and the sheikh rode back with them towards his village. Springing from his mare's back, he bade them welcome, and brought them into his house. Carpets and cushions were arranged, and they sat or reclined on them, and coffee was prepared. They were offered balls of spice, and afterwards hot coffee; whilst a small tent apart was being prepared for the ladies.

The sheikh's house was situated nearly in the centre of the village. They entered a large court, open to the sky, each part forming a separate apartment; of these, some were used as sleeping chambers, others for stables, store-houses, and granaries; and most of them were entered by low doorways.

The cheerful fire in the middle of the sheikh's house gave the wearied travellers a sense of comfort. By-and-bye they all partook of supper, which consisted of stewed mutton and rice, called by the Arabs kous-kous. It was served in a large, round iron dish. The dish was garnished with an ample supply of large, thin wheaten cakes. Both mutton and rice were excellently cooked, and served up smoking hot.

They were given their own tents apart, and night soon closed in on them. Carpets were spread, cushions placed for pillows, and rich, thickly-quilted coverlets were brought to cover them when they

desired to sleep. Coffee and large Arab cakes were served for them.

Next day the ladies visited the harem, and they all had a better opportunity of making the acquaintance of their hosts.

"Ibrahim tells me Ahmed Bey is a great warrior," said Middleton; "and his fame is widely spread. His body is covered with scars. I said to him:—'I suppose you have had enough fighting?' Ahmed Bey replied, indignantly:—'Would'st have me die in my bed like a Khavajah of Jedaide? No! I will die on the back of my mare.' I should say that he is bold, courageous, dashing, perhaps cruel," added Middleton; "but not mercenary."

"He is largely and powerfully made," said Mr. Cleveland, "even for an Arab. His shoulders are very broad, and his limbs are full and muscular, and finely developed."

"His face is handsome," said Middleton, "although his features are large and rather hard. His complexion is much darkened by exposure to the sun and weather."

"Mustafa says it is his pride to be well mounted," observed Dick. "He keeps five or six mares for his own riding, and attendants on dromedaries to lead them."

"I have been shown his lance," said Mr. Cleve-

land. "It is of unusual weight and length, with the head engrained with silver."

"Ibrahim says it is carried after him on expeditions by a follower on horseback. A formidable mace hangs from his saddle," added Middleton.

"He seems careless of his personal appearance. Mahmoud Bey is unlike his cousin in particular of dress. He is very neat and scrupulous in his attire; his white underclothing is spotless, surmounted by his plain black aba. Mahmoud Bey has the address of a gentleman. He is very handsome, quiet, and sedate."

"Ibrahim tells me he is crafty and subtle," commented Middleton, "and warns me not to trust him."

"I understand there is an anecdote concerning Mahmoud's favourite mare Feyruzah," said Mr. Cleveland, with some interest. "Do you know the story, Middleton?"

"Yes. Mustafa told me. Feyruzah is Arabic for Turquoise. She was foaled in the desert when Mahmoud Bey was on an expedition; unable to tarry, he was compelled to leave the foal behind to perish. But when he was resting under a palm, to his delight and astonishment, it came up with him. The plucky youngster had followed its mother's trail. It became its master's favourite mare."

“Meshow appears to notice everything,” said Cecil; “and such things as please his eye, he seems to like to feel with his fingers. His touch is extremely delicate.”

“That is characteristic of the Arabs,” answered Middleton. “This nephew of Ahmed Bey’s is the orphan son of the late sheikh of a desert tribe, and of the best and purest Arab blood. He is about eighteen.”

“His foot is the most perfect model I have ever seen,” said Cecil.

“Meshow himself is a perfect model of an Arab,” returned Middleton; “spare and slight, and not largely proportioned, like Ahmed Bey, but sinewy and fine-drawn, as of steel.”

“The whole movement of the man has grace and simple dignity,” said Mr. Cleveland.

“Yes. It betokens ancient blood in purity,” responded Middleton.

“I feel sure he is of poetic temperament,” said Cecil, thoughtfully. “Many of the Arabs are poetical. ‘Eloquent of the land where the sun is born!’ Meshow is silent, and his face is gentle and serious, with beautiful features, and deep, glowing eyes.”

“Frequently at morning and evening in the douar, I hear the loud and hearty voice of Ahmed

Bey," said Mr. Cleveland; "that of Meshow—never."

"That was a beautiful curved sword, with silver hilt, hung by a leather strap from Meshow's shoulder!" Dick exclaimed, with admiration. "I'd be happy if I could procure a sword like that amongst the Arabs here."

The party sojourned at this douar for some days. The time was of especial interest to Dick and Cecil, as they wandered about the village with Middleton. The wreaths of smoke curled lightly upwards on the pure air. Women were grinding corn in primitive hand-mills, or were busy winding wool on wooden sticks. A young girl was filling a goatskin pitcher at a well beneath a palm-tree. Two or three Arabs came up and stood near, gravely observant of the travellers.

Passing out presently through the village into the near desert, they saw the palm groves, and beyond, the arid, sunburnt tracts. They stood here awhile, luxuriously bathed in heat and silence.

Beyond them lay the sunlit face of the great desert. In the distance, amongst palms, appeared a number of low flat huts of brown earth. The occasional fitful breeze gently stirred their hair; a cool, soft breeze, perfumed with scent of flowers from the sweet oasis, whence came, too, soft twittering of birds.

As they were returning to the village they met a flock of goats, pattering towards the edge of the oasis; a little Arab shepherd was playing carelessly upon his pipe amongst his goats. Many blending noises came to them, softened by the distance, on the gentle breeze. Faint calls of labourers to one another, as they toiled in the palm-groves, and of women at the wells; merry chattering of Arab children; the dull bark of kabyle dogs.

The incessant murmur of the mingled voices came to them in fitful waves of sound. The many sounds of the d'ouar were vague, and mingled vaguely together, composing one low, soothing sound.

Each morning and evening picturesque and busy scenes were to be seen at the open wells, where large numbers of the people congregated to draw and carry water; and those who led up animals to water formed an expectant circle outside. At other times, veiled women might be seen at the wells; they poised their jars by uplifting their shapely brown bare arms, decorated with massive silver bangles, worn even by the poorest of them, dwelling in mud huts.

Immense herds of camels were taken out every morning to pasture, and returned in the evening.

The Arab dress was very simple at encampment.



One long garment, reaching below the knees, a kind of smock-frock, of whitey-brown colour, closing at the neck, with full, loose sleeves, and fastened round the waist with a broad leather belt—this with a skull-cap, and sometimes a pair of slippers, composed their desert toilette.

The ladies gave their experiences of the harem, where they spent a bad half-hour in the clutches of half a dozen volatile Arab ladies. They were received by the three young wives of the sheikh. The last married was the favourite, and she was extremely pretty. There were three older wives, who had had their day; but the most perfect harmony reigned in the harem.

“It is quite clear that the law here is unquestioning obedience,” said Middleton.

“In plain English,” answered Dick, “it’s not love in a cottage amongst the Arabs, but love and a big stick!”

“Do women prefer divinity—equality—or mastery—another word for slavery?” suggested Mr. Cleveland.

“Is marriage a failure?” queried Middleton.

“I’ve heard it said, it generally means the right a woman gains to go through a man’s pockets when he is asleep,” said Dick.

“You recollect the story of the well of St. Keyne?” said Mr. Cleveland. “The first to drink the water of this well is said to obtain mastery over the household. I heard of a husband hurrying from church to the well—but his wife had been beforehand with him, for she had taken a bottle of the water to church with her.”

“It appears to me that courtship and marriage may be illustrated thus: First they give way to one another, and afterwards they don’t.”

The ladies gave their experiences of the harem privately.

“One old lady asked us many personal questions,” Cecil said, “as to our harems, ages, and so forth.”

“She asked me if I was a ‘passed wife’ of my own brother’s,” said Miss Seraphina, bridling indignantly.

“She had taken Uncle James for a great sheikh in his own country,” said Cecil, laughing.

“She would not believe me when I said I was unmarried,” said Miss Seraphina, evidently flattered, and blushing with an ancient but becoming modesty.

“I suppose she then commenced a careful examination of your dress and ornaments?” said Dick.

“And purloined Auntie’s bracelet for her own brown arm,” said Cecil, much amused at vivid recollections of their visit to the harem; “cordially requesting her to make her a backsheesh thereof. Aunt Seraphina heartily demurred. Whereupon the lady asked feelingly for some of Aunty’s hair to put in the locket she had stolen from her neck. You would scarcely think Aunt Seraphina could refuse it as a keepsake after that! But our Aunty is strong-minded. She not only could, but did refuse. And the lady of the harem returned the ornaments to their rightful owner very sullenly.”

“She wished to take out my dear Great-Uncle Peter’s hair, and to put mine in,” explained Miss Seraphina, indignantly. “I could not part with dear Great-Uncle Peter’s latest gift to me, or shift his lock of hair!”

“I wonder just how long Aunt Seraphina’s hair would have remained in it?” observed Dick, pensively.

“The women seemed to tell us very little about themselves,” commented Cecil. “Their talk consisted almost entirely of questions.”

“That’s a common failing amongst women everywhere,” commented Dick, sententiously. “Curiosity, thy name is Woman!”

“And their actions were beyond the telling!”

said Miss Seraphina, with asperity, and uplifted hands.

“To err is very human!” interpolated Dick.

“But I think I have succeeded in teaching that fat old woman that perfect honesty is the best policy!”

“Ah! Honesty’s not always the best policy,” said Dick. “When I was going home from school with cousin Charles, I once picked up a sovereign in the train. Charles was envious of my luck, and made me give it to the guard, to find the proper owner. The fellow grinned ecstatically as he put it in his pocket. I firmly believe he identified himself as the owner of that stray sovereign! My father was so pleased with me for my integrity that he gave me half-a-crown. The reward seemed to me somehow to fall short of twenty shillings. And, moreover, Charles unfairly claimed half of it because he’d made me honest! He reminded me that half a loaf was better than no bread. I thought that adding insult to injury. Ah!” said Dick, with pensive retrospection, “if I’d been a little older and a little wiser, Charles’d never have got his share of that half-crown from me—nor the guard that sovereign. And, in the future, I’ll undertake to identify any stray sovereign that comes my way,” he added firmly.

Cecil, especially, now picked up Arabic very quickly and began to talk it easily, to Meshow's great delight. He found her an apt pupil, and he paid the Englishwomen every service in his power, particularly Cecil. He insisted on being their attendant in walks and rides. He was sometimes accompanied by his foster-brother, Ghudda, when they went to any distance.

Whilst they were at his douar Ahmed Bey told them of another sheikh, Suleyman ibn Mirshid, whose daughter, Fetneh, was betrothed to Mahmoud Bey. He proposed that they should visit Suleyman, when they went to fetch the bride, and accompany the bridal party back to join in the coming festivities, for the marriage was to take place soon. They assented gladly. A few days later their escort was waiting with their camels and dromedaries at a little distance from the village. They found them under some thorn trees, waiting to guide them to Suleyman's douar.

As they approached his village, from a distance they could see an Arab mount his horse and ride towards them. Springing from his steed's back to the ground, he greeted them with every mark of pleasure and esteem. He was Suleyman, the owner of the douar before them.

Their tent was pitched, their baggage unloaded;

and they were offered the refreshment of fine dates and rich, fresh milk, which they had already found was a favourite repast amongst the habitues of the desert.

## CHAPTER IX.

It was at Suleyman ibn Mirshid's douar that Middleton, for the first time, saw Fetneh. Fetneh was the only daughter of the old sheikh, and the pride of Suleyman's heart. He allowed her special privileges, and a general amount of freedom from restraint, not usually accorded to the Arab women.

On their first arrival in his house, the English party saw a little group of Arab women seated there apart, and carefully veiled. By-and-bye the sheikh said something in Arabic to a black slave, who, with the women, hurriedly withdrew. Then Suleyman turned to Mr. Cleveland:

“My daughter, Fetneh, hath desired to see thy women. Perchance thou wilt permit them now to visit in the harem? Having sojourned at the tents of Ahmed Bey, thou knowest that the light of my eyes, my beloved, is betrothed to Mahmoud Bey, his cousin? We go presently upon a journey, for the wedding festival will soon be held at the douar of Ahmed Bey.”

In the harem the two Frankish ladies were received by Fetneh with gracious smiles and Oriental

courtesy. Here unveiled women came and went, gliding silently about in their embroidered slippers, and regarding the strangers with childlike, vivid curiosity. After a brief visit here, they returned again to their own tent, to rest after their journey.

Later, Middleton set forth alone to wander about the douar. Here there were date palm-trees, straight and tall, and plummy, with heavy clusters of golden or purple fruit. Far away amongst the palm-groves that he was approaching, he could hear the distant dreamy sound of a flute, played softly, floating on the mellow, drowsy air. As he came near, a few birds were twittering about, and a few butterflies were hovering languidly in the warm, golden sunshine. The flute ceased for an interval; then again he heard it, nearer, played more ardently; and he saw a slender youth approaching slowly, the flute raised to his lips. Beneath the trees the sand was warm, and golden in the sunshine, where his bare feet touched it. He recognised the youth as Yusuf, one of the many sons of Suleyman ibn Mirshid, and Fetneh's youngest brother. His face had already interested and charmed Middleton. It was aristocratic, like Meshow's, but more like the face of a happy dreamer. His great lustrous eyes were magnificent; tender, indolent, enchanted.

He played a few notes of ravishingly sweet me-



lody, ineffably wild and bird-like; then very clear and soft. Pausing for a moment, he smiled sweetly and seriously upon the stranger, as only Arabs can smile; then raised the flute to his lips again, and went his way, still playing his songs of languor, heat, and love, and solitude.

Further on was a picturesque, small group of palm-trees, guarded by a low wall of baked brown earth. Beyond the wall of this palm-garden was a well. Standing here in thoughtful solitude, beneath the palms, Middleton saw presently, approaching him, a woman in white haik, flowing loosely over her Arab dress, with a silver girdle clasping her slender waist.

She allowed her white haik to fall suddenly, disclosing to the astonished Middleton her rare, warm Eastern charms. A beautiful girl of sixteen, with a tall and shapely form, a resolute countenance, firm, richly-cut mouth, and splendid dark eyes.

It struck Middleton as a cold, handsome, scornful face, suggesting such conflicts between external and internal life that it aroused his keenest interest and pity. She was evidently one to whom the harem existence would become in time intolerable.

The faint shadow of a smile flickered over her features as she read the involuntary admiration in his face. The passive weariness of her face changed

in an instant into voluptuous softness as she raised her lustrous, languid eyes to Middleton. Then still lower drooped her eyelids. She filled her water-jar, and lifted it with a wide, easy sweep of her beautiful bare arm to her shoulder; and steadying it with the fingers of one shapely hand, she smiled at Middleton. The smile was scarcely on her lips, but in her dark and languid eyes. She lifted her haik again across her mouth, and turned to leave the well. As she went she sang softly to herself some quaint and never-ending love-song of the East.

"This, I think, is Fetneh," reflected Middleton. "What struggles some of these beauties of the East must undergo before they settle down into the wearisome routine of harem life!"

"There seem to be a good many negroes amongst the Arabs here, now that we have penetrated so far into the great Sahara," said Cecil, later on, as the English party sat apart in their own tent.

"The desert Arabs appear darker and more negro-looking than those in Morocco or Algeria," said Mr. Cleveland.

"That is in cases where the Arab blood is not so pure," said Middleton.

"They appear to have black slaves in great abundance here."

“Yes. And the slaves are always kindly treated.”

“Here they are trusted and well cared for. Much more so than in cities. But I believe they often domineer in their masters’ families as they grow old.”

“Well, in the present instance,” Cecil said, “the woman Nasli seems devoted to her young mistress. She quite worships this desert beauty, Fetneh.”

“That may well enough be true,” said Middleton; “as the servant of servants to sheikhs in the desert, the slave is devoted and obedient.”

A little later Middleton was wandering alone along the narrow, branching paths in the palm-grove, his ears charmed again by hearing in the distance the elusive, subtle, dreamily-played melody of the flute; when a single white garment glided into view amongst the palms, and Nasli, the black slave, appeared before him.

Her neck and arms were hung with chains and bangles, set with squares of red coral, and flawed coloured stones. Barbaric silver ornaments were fastened in her hair.

Stooping before him, Nasli saluted Middleton, raised and kissed the hem of his garment, and delivered to him a brief message from her mistress, Fetneh.

“My mistress would speak with thee privily beneath the palm-trees in these groves.”

“I will await her coming,” answered Middleton, with some surprise.

Thereupon Nasli glided silently away, and presently returned to him, followed by a figure in white robe and haik.

Fetneh came nearer to Middleton amongst the palms, and Nasli, withdrawing a little way, prepared to keep careful watch close by.

Sunshine flickered everywhere around them, weaving beautiful patterns in the shadows of the palms, where the golden light passed between divided leafage. As far as eyes could see, the feathery, tufted foliage swayed gently in the light breeze.

As Middleton stood wondering, Fetneh suddenly unveiled herself before him. The eager expectation and suspense of her beautiful dark face changed in an instant into a voluptuous softness as her large, brown eyes fell on his countenance.

“When mine eyes first fell upon thee in my father’s house, O Frankish stranger, then did I know I loved thee. And my heart went forth to meet thee when I met thee at the well. Greatly had I desired to have that meeting with thee. And, being privileged to freely come and go, I presently made

opportunity to meet thee at the well and show my beauty unto thee. Look upon me, stranger—am I not fairer than the women of thy country? Look upon me!”

Holding back her veil with both her hands, Fetneh gazed upon him proudly.

“You are fair indeed,” said Middleton. “But your rich beauty, Fetneh, is not for me.”

“Thou lovest the woman of the Franks,” she responded slowly. “Nay, think not I have not seen thy love for her—but she loves thee not! And I am fairer—yet thy heart turns not to me. But this may come. Leave yonder cold-faced and cold-hearted woman here behind thee in the desert—fly with Fetneh, who knows how to love!”

She had thrown herself, with Oriental abandonment, on her knees before him.

“No, Fetneh—kneel not to me. What you ask of me is impossible. I love another woman; one of my own race and my own country.”

“In the day of adversity wilt thou find Fetneh faithful. But not that other cold, faint-hearted woman!”

“Fetneh, you should know my heart can know no changing!”

“I would that the Frankish woman were dead,”

she answered sullenly, "for then would'st thou love me!"

She spoke with all the abandonment of pent-up passion, now set free—the wild passion of an Oriental nature. Middleton, remaining silent from sheer pity, she burst forth again:

"I fear. I hate this man I am compelled by destiny to wed. Take me away from my weary desert lot, and from one whom I now abhor—take me from the hopeless weariness of harem life into the happiness and freedom I have heard of from the women of thy country. Lo! I, too, am sprung from Frankish origin. Even Fetneh has a strain of Frankish blood warm in her veins. Harken, stranger! The grandmother of Fetneh was a Frankish foundling who was adopted by the ruling sheikh of this tribe. Nay!" she added, proudly, with a haughty uplifting of her head, "but on the Arab side my blood is also of the best!"

Middleton again was silent.

All the mingled passion of that unrestrained, wild Eastern nature now burst forth.

"Let us fly from this accursed country—thou and I together. O beloved, let us fly—let us leave this Land of Kismet. Crafty and very subtle is Mahmoud Bey. Fain would I fly with one I love and worship, from the one I hate and fear. Take

me away with thee to thine own country, therefore—O, light of my eyes, take me as thy slave and hand-maid, if thou wilt.”

Still kneeling, Fetneh would have laid her head upon his feet; but Middleton repulsed her firmly, though with great gentleness.

“Arise, O woman. Fetneh, this is madness,” he said, pityingly. “What you ask of me is quite impossible.”

Fetneh seized Middleton’s reluctant hand, and pressed it to her forehead, saying:—

“Whither thou goest, there will Fetneh go. Even as her heart is, henceforth is her home with thee!”

“Fetneh, I refuse to listen to you any longer!”

Middleton drew his hand away from her’s.

The passive scorn of Fetneh’s face changed in an instant into fierceness. Her chin went up; still lower drooped her lids. She leaned forward then to scan him with her handsome, insolent, bold eyes.

“Wilt thou not be master?” she exclaimed with an indignant sneer. “Nay, then, O foolish one, thou shalt be slave—my slave, perchance, for though thou scornest me, yet have I power thou knowest not of—but thou shalt know hereafter.”

“Fetneh, I scorn you not!”

The woman set aside his words with a proud gesture.

“Hearken to me, stranger! Fierceness with the sun and heat beat ever on the Arabs in the desert—thou, too, wilt one day learn to feel. Peradventure, wilt thou think with vain regret of Fetneh. What is written is written!”

Letting her veil fall again before her face, she left him there abruptly, as the watchful Nasli made her an urgent sign that they must go; and they both vanished quickly from his view in the intricate shadows of the palm grove, leaving Middleton staring after them with much perplexity.

These rapid transitions from nervous violence to softness, and from tender smiles to crashing anger, were most unusual and Eastern, most bewildering, thought Middleton, much disturbed, as he, too, turned to go.

“The desert is surely the strangest place in all the world,” he thought, greatly troubled, “and woman is the strangest complexity in life. When one meets them both together—climax comes!”



## CHAPTER X.

Fetneh sat in an apartment of her father's house, perfumed with languorous, sweet odours of Araby. She was alone with Mahmoud, her betrothed. His eyes wore an expression of unwonted gentleness as they rested on her.

"Faris-es-Shebah! Marshallah! Allah hath made thee very beautiful—thou hast no fault!"

Fetneh turned her magnificent liquid eyes upon the Arab, cajoling Mahmoud in unwonted fashion.

"This Frank whom thou hast trusted as thine honoured guest, O Mahmoud Bey, he hath made love to me," she told him presently.

Mahmoud's ever smouldering jealousy of other men, so easily excited, in an instant was on fire. He had always resented Fetneh's special freedom from restraint amongst the other women.

"It was thy father's will to treat thee differently, O Fetneh, because of thy mother's strain of Frankish blood. Else had'st thou been treated even as the other women of the harem—as I will treat thee when thou art my wife!"

"It was even this unwonted freedom; else had thine eyes beheld me not until we were betrothed!"

"What said the stranger unto thee?" asked Mahmoud.

"This accursed Frank hath made violent love to me—thine own betrothed. He desired to steal me from thee, and to take me to his home by stealth, away from mine own tents and desert people—and from thee!"

"And thou—what didst reply—what was thine answer to the Frank?" he asked impatiently.

"I bade him mate with one of his own race and faith, in his own land," she answered boldly.

"How shall I punish him—revenge thee best—myself and thou?"

"The Frank would fetch his price in the Sudan," the woman answered slowly; "or at Timbuctoo, sold there to the Sultan for a slave—for he is strong, and very handsome."

A gleam, a swift suspicious look, came suddenly into the Arab's thoughtful face.

"Send him," Fetneh said, relentlessly, perceiving this, "to the slave-market of Morocco, or Timbuctoo, or the Great Sudan."

"Nay, why should I not kill him?" he asked hotly.

His countenance was extraordinary with its dogged, passionate expression.

Fetneh involuntarily shrank back before the smouldering passion that burnt in the Arab's eyes, mingling with an admiration for her that was almost ferocious in its intensity.

Two flames seemed to Fetneh to be burning in her heart—a fierce flame of joy and vengeance, and as fierce a flame of yearning pity and of self-contempt. At the sudden savageness of Mahmoud's tone did Fetneh tremble, as she shrank away from him; and she repented for a moment, when it was too late, her unscrupulous betrayal of Middleton.

But only for a moment—then she shook off her remorse and pain.

“Nay, kill him not, O Mahmoud Bey, for he would fetch his price in the Sudan—or he would bring thee princely ransom.”

The suspicious look had deepened in his face. His expression became in a moment sinister. Mahmoud was almost as jealous as he was vain. He fixed his eyes on Fetneh, and his face was grave with thought.

“What is this talk of ransom! What is his fate to thee? O my beloved. Why carest thou?

“Nay, I care not. Thou shalt gain much gold

if his friends pay the ransom. Doubtless they would give good value for him. And if they ransom him, then will he return to his own land and wed this woman of the Franks, and thereafter he will think no more of me."

"I go to the Bedouins," Mahmoud Bey said quickly—"I will arrange amongst them for the capture of the Frank."

So saying, he left Fetneh hurriedly.

A few days later the wedding journey was taken, Fetneh riding proudly her nuptial dromedary. She rode in a litter, canopied by embroidered, tasselled, and tinselled silk. On the canopy was an appropriate text from the Koran, embroidered in gold. Nasli rode with the bride, and her attendants and protectors, all riding much-caparisoned camels, one carrying the bride's trousseau and her dower, preceded and followed her, accompanied by the Frankish company. On the long journey, musicians rode after the bride, incessantly beating drums. Thus they all arrived at the donar of Ahmed Bey, where they were welcomed very heartily.

The sound of drums and fifes, and of rejoicings were kept up late at night. Young and old ran out to see the processions; the Arab maidens in their best attire. To see the bridegroom and his friends, the veiled bride, the musicians, and the crowd.

And the flashing lights gave animation to the scene.

On the day following their arrival at the douar, Nasli approached her mistress, who sat alone, and crouching down beside her on the carpet, gazed at her wistfully.

“Weary are my days, O Nasli,” said Fetneh, after a long, sullen silence, turning to the slave. “Fain would I leave harem life behind me, and fly far away to other lands. Here we are held captives——”

She broke off, and paused here, brooding with a downcast face. Then she resumed:—

“And ever, talk of marriage for our women—even they who have no childhood granted them,” said Fetneh, in a dull, monotonous despair. “The never-ending song, the never-ending music. The lute ever harsh and mocking to mine ears!”

“Nay, it is very sweet and tuneful, when played skilfully!”

“My misery makes it seem harsh to me,” said Fetneh. “The garabooka never ceases, and the pipes shrill all night long—the marriage music is ever on the roads—O Nasli, I am weary—very weary-hearted—and mine heart is sick to death!”

Fetneh raised her beautiful arms wearily above her head, her heavy silver bangles falling with musical clashing.

"The sheikh Suleyman, my father, hath already delayed my marriage as long as possible, at my request."

"Perchance thou wilt be happier with Mahmoud than thou thinkest now."

"Verily the Frankish women must be very happy!"

"Allah send thee happiness," replied the slave.

"Happy is the Frankish woman—happy is she! And I, look you? I am most unhappy! Ai! Ai!"

"Let not my lord hear thee," said the quick-eared Nasli, hastily. "Mahmoud Bey is coming even now—and he hath gifts for thee!"

"I care not!" said Fetneh, sullenly.

"Now is he coming to thee—peace!"

And Mahmoud entered.

"I greet thee, O beloved, O light of my eyes! Soon will the marriage music sound for thee and me. O, happy day! Even now are they preparing for the festival. Behold!"

His hands were filled with gifts of bridal finery—rich golden earrings, strings of priceless pearls, and turquoises and costly diamonds strung on golden chains. Mahmoud, at one time, had joined in raids and plunder with the wild Bedouins of the desert. Lastly, he presented Fetneh with a strong

silver chain, of exquisite workmanship, set with flawed emeralds.

“Behold my wedding gift to thee! This shall be thy zone, thy girdle, and thou shalt wear it at thy marriage festival.”

Fetneh looked upon the chain, and then at Mahmoud with a mysterious and sudden horror.

“Why givest me this?”

“That shalt thou know hereafter! It is a symbol, meantime, and it hath for thee a hidden meaning! Thou shalt know its use hereafter.”

Left alone again with Nasli, Fetneh sat there pondering in silent apathy, sunk in despair. The slave sat silent at her feet, caressing them.

On the day of the festival came Nasli to her mistress hastily.

“Already the pipers are playing, and many are assembled to see the women dance. Thy brother Yusuf playeth love-songs for thee on his flute.”

While the pipes shrilled, the English party came upon the scene, to watch the pretty children, with their perfect little hands, dancing with their free and blithesome grace. Then the sound of a flute reached their ears.

“I know that air,” said Middleton; “that sparkling shower of notes. I have heard it often in the palm grove.”

The sound of the flute came to Fetneh ceaselessly; by turns wild and romantic, joyous, sad, uncivilised. Yusuf could sweetly sing the love-songs of the East—the songs of beauty, heat, and languor.

“It is my brother’s flute,” she said; “only Yusuf can play the flute like that!”

She could not endure the endless song it made, for there was a wild pathos in the music as it reached her ears, which sank deep in her heart. She was glad when the sounds of the flute sank softly into silence.

Then the faint cry of the African hautboy rose up above the tom-toms. The festival was even now beginning, and the procession soon took place.

At the marriage festival lambs, stuffed with cucumbers and symbolic cakes, were served to rich and poor, who were bidden to the feast, and dancing girls and musicians performed while the guests feasted.

The women and girls wore huge gold earrings, bracelets, and anklets; and triangular silver skewers fastened the draperies across the breast; their narrow girdles were worked with gold thread, and hung with lumps of coral.

Mahmoud’s wedding dress was a small, neat turban, with a white ground, on which was a neat



sprig pattern worked in gold; cotton breeches, and an undercoat, over which was thrown a long loose cloak, with a white ground, on which was an elegant flower pattern; and on his feet were Arab slippers of scarlet goatskin.

To the bride, in her rich dress, the days of the festival seemed very long.

On the appointed day Mahmoud came to Fetneh, where she sat awaiting him.

“Lo! thy bridegroom comes,” said Nasli; “even now approacheth Mahmoud Bey.”

“We are not abiding here! Art ready, O Fetneh, for our journey in the desert? I am come to take my bride to mine own douar!”

The woman gave her new-made husband a faint sign of haughtiest assent.

“Since it must be so, I await thy will. What must be, must be!”

Then Mahmoud took her hand in his to lead her forth.

The distant sound of Yusuf’s flute was in her ears, as the youth showered forth his liquid notes. The distant love-song of the flute seemed like a touch of enchantment in the grove.

Still the flute of Yusuf showered soft, clear music on the air from amongst the nearer palms.

Now the flute was close to them, and the intense, unending song of love for ever in her ears.

When Suleyman approached the wedded pair, came Yusuf with him. He was still carrying his flute, held lightly in his slender fingers. The gentle Arab youth looked upon his sister with a tender expression in his poetic face. He spoke some words aside to Mahmoud, in low and eager tones, pointing to his sister as he did so. Mahmoud heard him with averted and impassive face, without reply.

Suleyman ibn Mirshid took a tender farewell of his daughter, and her brother Yusuf stood beside her wistfully, his whole soul in his deep, expressive eyes. The Arabs and the English party looked on with keen interest. Mahmoud mounted his horse, and as Fetneh placed her foot upon his foot, he raised her to the saddle in front of him. The people bade him farewell laughingly, with many Salaams; wishing them a happy ride to their own douar.

The garabooka was beaten loudly still, the shrill sound of the pipe followed them monotonously as they turned away, and the sound of the festival still rang within their ears.

Before them rode the attendants for a little while, chanting love songs in the sun. The sound of those songs seemed to the unhappy woman to pierce her heart. It seemed like the sound of the

great desert singing to her of its wild and savage love—not the soft, refined, more human love for which she longed and hungered.

The gay cries from the festival were dying away. Mahmoud's horse kept time with the swinging step of the camels, whose riders kept up with him for a short time—till at last they turned back to the douar, and the bridal music grew fitful and faint, and then died away in the distance.

When all the voices of the village faded away the unhappy bride still strained her ears to catch their fading echoes.

They rode out in the desert through the blazing sunlight, beyond the last green belt of verdure, and beyond the last line of palms.

Involuntarily Fetneh sighed.

“Art weary, O Fetneh?” Mahmoud asked. “Seems the way long to thee, alone with me? Yet must we journey on!”

A subtle mocking sound was mingled with the genuine tenderness of his tones.

“It is well, O Mahmoud Bey,” she answered shortly. “I care not. Then onward!”

They had now left the douar well behind them, and they were alone upon the waste. The Arab seized the cold, reluctant woman closely, fiercely, in his arms, covering all her face with hot, fierce

kisses. Then he touched his steed with his heel, and the eagerly-responsive horse sprang forward, and began to gallop madly off.

They had ridden long on the far desert, resting occasionally by the way, when there appeared at the verge of it a dull green line, betokening the distant palms of an oasis. They began to ride more slowly toward it on the sandy waste, amongst the little round humps where clusters of bushes grew.

The dark green line showed clearer through the sunshine across the gleaming flats, broke into feathery tufts, and broadened into a still far-off dimness of distant palms.

The horse now went so swiftly that Fetneh involuntarily flung up her arms, and clung about her husband's neck in sudden, deadly fear. Her fluttering breath was on her husband's cheek. It thrilled the Arab to the heart. He drew her nearer to him, and sought her full, red lips with his again, with a fierce eagerness and cruel triumph, and a passionate abandonment that he had kept in stern restraint before.

Though he had felt suspicious lately, Mahmoud Bey strove to deceive himself into believing he was the sole possessor now of Fetneh's heart. His pulses bounded madly at the thought. His blood

was like liquid fire as it coursed through his veins. He felt his whole heart throb exultantly. This, indeed, was the right way to woo and win a woman's reluctant heart. Fetneh was alone with him in the great, lonely desert—she was his wife—and she would love him yet as he would be loved. Her wavering heart had turned to him at last—it would, it must!—and give him beat for beat.

He bent his head towards her face again, as her head lay on his breast. But Fetneh had divined instinctively her husband's thought. Coldly she withdrew from his neck her supple, clinging arms.

As she released her hold and shrank away from him, the Arab laughed.

“Thou art mine, O Fetneh—mine own—none can take thee from me whither I am going!”

His voice had lost its conciliatory and persuasive tone, and a dull anger burnt upon his face.

Mahmoud was urging forward his fleet horse. The ceaseless thud of its hoofs beat the hard sand as it flew along. In the ears of Fetneh the sound pulsed with vague foreboding. Her haik was blown aside, and then her floating veil; her loose, dark hair was often blown on Mahmoud's face, and across his lips. He went faster—faster still—went fast that she might cling to him in fear, if not in love.

But the woman read his thought, and she released her slightest hold with coldness, as she shrank as far as possible away from his restraining touch.

The Arab laughed.

"Be it so!" he muttered, and drew her violently to his breast, and held her closely to him, and so galloped madly on his course.

"Where art thou taking me?" she cried, stung into speech.

"What matters that to thee, beloved? Dost think the way so far, alone with me? It is but a little distance now. And soon the sun will set."

Here and there, in the depressions of the sterile ground, there had been a thin scurf of green, which meant that water was not far from the surface. Then, quite suddenly, the way dipped down into a bowl-shaped hollow, with an exquisite, most dainty group of palm-trees, and a lovely green sward at the bottom of it; for they had reached an oasis near a well. The last of the sun gleamed upon that brilliant patch of clear and restful colour, with the bare desert all around it. And the promise of water and shade would have been grateful to the wearied woman, but for her state of deep anxiety and fear.

And near at hand—though they were far in the heart of the desert—surrounded by high walls, half

buried by drifting sand, the doors buried in the sand, stood an old, ruined temple. The crumbling remains of an ancient building, so old that no date could be assigned to it. Designed in some far-off time, perhaps, for some great Emir in his journeyings; or perhaps some solitary fanatic, to worship Allah in the lonely desert, far from haunts of men.

Mahmoud paused, at last, from his long, mad ride, and gently walked his steed.

Away from them stretched the unrelieved desert, to die into soft violet hue in extreme distance. In the foreground the rich golden sand was dazzling in the late sunshine. But Fetneh's face was turned towards the shimmering violet haze in mute despair.

"Where hast thou brought me, O Mahmoud?" she asked at last, "Whither goest thou?"

"What matters it, so thou art with thy husband?" he responded, with a hard, fierce laugh. "We have come to our own, happy, desert home, where none shall take thee from me, and I shall have thee in mine own safe keeping evermore! Come, O my wife!"

He rode up to the ruined temple as he spoke, moving slowly and deliberately over the warm sand.

"Where art thou taking me?" she cried again.

“Not there—oh, not there——”

For answer he dismounted from his mare, and took her in his arms, to lift her down. The horse stood quietly by, with accustomed docility.

Mahmoud had hard work to scrape away the piled-up sand from the wall of the mosque.

“The sand has shifted since last I was here,” he said.

Fetneh stood by quietly, and watched his actions listlessly. She knew it was vain to attempt escape, and her face was filled with an impassive, cold despair. With unseeing eyes she watched the lizards slipping in and out of the small crevices and holes in the old, crumbling walls. The sun began to set, and Mahmoud ceased awhile, to bow his head in prayer. Then he worked on again in the golden mists of evening.

By this time he had made an opening through which a man might pass, and then he stopped to rest. It was growing dark, and the cool night wind had come upon the desert. In a little while he said:—

“Look at the light yonder in the sky, O Fetneh, the light that comes just after nightfall has set in. It comes vainly, even as hope came vainly to me that I had won thy love.”

He uttered the last words in tones of fierce re-



gret, and sat in brooding silence till the moon had risen. Then he rose, and took her hand.

“Come thou with me!” he said.

And presently he slid, with Fetneh in his arms, through the opening he had made, and, falling on soft sand within, recovered his feet. It was seldom that the drifted sand lay thickly enough to allow a climb over the high wall; to allow anyone to enter the court. The picturesque windows were partly smothered, the doors were entirely buried in sand. It was dark within, and Mahmoud produced and lighted a small lamp he had with him, and entered the mosque with Fetneh, holding up the lamp.

There were signs that he had been here recently.

“Lo! I have prepared for thee, O my bride,” he said.

High above them rose the domed roof of the temple, richly painted in red and gold; round the upper portion of the walls ran arabesque in white plaster, bearing in graceful design verses from the Koran; the walls were of plain, slightly-tinted plaster, and the flooring of rich tiles. At the further side was an alcove, the former seat, perhaps, of some great Emir. And an old Moorish lamp, fitted with small panes of dull jewelled glass hung there.

## CHAPTER XI.

Mahmoud set down the lamp he carried in his hand, and lighted the old Moorish lamp that hung in the alcove; and it gleamed softly, mystically, over the strange scene. He turned suddenly to Fetneh.

“Here art thou safe with me!” he said, and laughed—a strange, low laugh of mingled pain, contempt; of triumph, failure, power, and despair.

The woman gazed upon him sullenly, and her red lips quivered. Her heart sank deep within her breast. She had thrown back her veil, but now she drew it close about her. Mahmoud took her in his arms again, and kissed her passionately. Fetneh shuddered at his touch. She shrank before the fire that smouldered in his eyes. He released her with a bitter sense of fierce impotency.

“Wilt thou kill me here, O Mahmoud?”

“Nay, beloved, but I intend to tame thee—when thou shalt love me as a true wife loves her husband I will set thee free. I have ever blamed thy father’s foolishness in allowing thee an unusual amount of freedom amongst the other women, because of thy

alien birth. But here I have thee in mine own safe keeping. Lest other men's eyes stray to thee, attracted by thy beauty. For think not I hold thee altogether blameless, though I have accused thee not!"

A dangerous look woke in his face, of fiercest jealousy. After a brief, grim silence he resumed:—

"Later, in mine arms, thou wilt forget the hours that thou hast spent in weeping—the hours that thou hast waited solitary in the darkness here. For in this lonely and sand-covered temple it is dark in day-time as at night. And when thy wild and wilful heart is tamed to me, and thou hast learnt the lesson I will teach—thou wilt forget then, in the morning of thy new-born love for me, that these heavy hours of darkness and of weariness had ever been!"

The woman gave a great cry of exceeding bitterness behind her veil, and raised it suddenly.

"The passing caravans will water at this well, and I will cry to them!"

"Nay, this ancient mosque and oasis are regarded by the Arabs with great fear and dread. Reluctantly they halt for water at this well, and they will never linger here when once they have filled their empty water-skins. There is a wild, strange

tale attached to the ruins here. Only I would venture here, O Fetneh, and thou—with me!”

She continued silent, standing still before him with her head bent down.

“Now will this silent woman speak, and tell me what is in her heart?”

Mahmoud gazed wistfully at Fetneh, who once more had drawn her veil aside that she might see him better. The lamplight fell upon her face, and he who looked for love, perceived that her dark eyes were full of fear. This roused his bitter anger and resentment.

“Thou wilt not torture—wilt not kill me here?”

“This talk is foolishness. Nay—not kill, nor even hurt thee—thou deservest neither death, nor torture—thy sin hath not been so great. But thou wert my betrothed—yet thereafter didst betray my love. I will tame thy spirit—will subject thy will to mine—and when once thou lovest me even as a meek, obedient wife should love and willingly obey her husband, thou art free. But thy wild, free spirit must first be held in due subjection to mine own. First must thou own me master, and thy rightful lord. Torture? Nay, I will not mar thy brightness and thy beauty—for that at least is mine. I desire not to pain thy body, nor yet disfigure thee. Thou

shalt be beautiful, and still mine own, even in death itself—if death it be!”

The woman looked sideways at him, beneath her narrowed, downcast lids, and shuddered. Why this portentous calm in one who had been hitherto so fierce and passionate.

“Fetneh, I have sworn to tame thy spirit, and to make of thee a wife who is obedient and meek.”

The woman’s desert blood was up. In that moment she was ready to die. Her bosom heaved. She pressed her hands resolutely against her heaving bosom, to still the rising storm within. The gleam of flame-lit steel was in her eyes. They gleamed like those of a roused lioness at bay. Her face suggested a strange force; the way she held herself, consuming passion.

“I will never be thy wife, except in name!”

“Surely this is but idle talk, O Fetneh!”

“Verily, all that I have told thee is the truth.”

An expression of savage ferocity appeared in Mahmoud’s face.

“Softly, thou shameless one! What of the Frank?”

“Will it content thee that I never see him more?”

“That is without avail,” said Mahmoud Bey. “Here, in this lonely, desert mosque, will I leave thee to thy fate, if thou reject the cup of mercy offered thee. With none to find thee, and none to hear, save only the idle desert wind that bloweth where it listeth, and the wild things of the desert.”

He smiled cruelly, and added:—

“From one douar to another, throughout the whole of the Sudan, amongst the nomads, will they soon seek in vain the Frank.”

A fierce excitement shone in Fetneh’s lustrous eyes, and her hands were trembling.

“I hate thee, Mahmoud—hate thee—with a hate as strong as death—and I love the Frank! I lied to thee concerning him; and I betrayed him to thee for my vengeance, that he had repulsed me when I spoke to him of love. And to make thee suffer even as I suffer, I now speak truth.”

Mahmoud’s face grew hard and stern.

“Those who remain silent cannot speak folly. Cease, O foolish one!”

“Yet do I love the Frank!”

“Strange are the ways of Allah! Is this thy strain of alien blood? Thou lovest one not of thy race—one who loves thee not—when such as I love thee!”

He added, sternly:—

“Thou desirest death, then?”

Fetneh bowed her head upon her breast. Her Arab fatalism was awakened.

“Am I a child, that I should fear death? Far rather death for me, than thy embrace! Kismet! It is written!”

“Maleseh! Kismet? Thy Kismet will be as thy lord’s pleasure is!”

Mahmoud Bey stood looking at her. Fetneh gazed back at him as though turned into stone. She stood in her white robes, dressed for her marriage festival, covered with the rich gems and ornaments with which he had loaded her. Mahmoud Bey was rich with plundering the caravans of old, and had been generous with his gifts to his betrothed; and Fetneh’s neck was hung with rich strings of costly pearls and turquoises, and elaborately-worked gold chains, strung with fine emeralds.

“Nay,” said the Arab, softly, and his eyes wore rather a gentle expression as he looked on her. “My life flows out to thee. I will not mar thy beauty—for that, at least, is mine—I mean not that.”

Carried away by some deep feeling, suddenly he bent his head before her, lifted her hand to his forehead, and then touched it with his lips—an unwonted action of the Arabs towards their women.

"After storm, calm; after war, peace; after death, hell—or paradise!"

"Thou wilt be merciful—thou hast forgiven me?" she asked, in sudden hope.

"Not yet, O woman," responded Mahmoud Bey. "He who is merciful forgives—but I forgive not yet. The time is not come!"

"I ask not forgiveness," answered Fetneh, proudly.

"Nor do I offer it—a time will surely come when thou wilt beg me for it, even on thy knees—then I will not withhold it from thee; but then I shall command thee to make choice between life-long captivity, and my embrace."

"Far rather death for me than thy embrace!"

"Dost thou not fear to die?" asked Mahmoud, wonderingly.

"Why should I fear to die?" said Fetneh, calmly. "All must pass through that door. It matters not whether it is to-day or to-morrow."

Mahmoud Bey cast a strange look upon her. Suddenly her proud, calm features quivered, and he felt a momentary, painful triumph as he observed the quivering of the beautiful proud lips, which strove to stifle back a sob. She uttered some strange, Arabic exclamation, tried to control herself,



and failed miserably. She threw herself upon her knees before the Arab.

“I am young and very beautiful—I desire life, not death—I desire to live—I do not wish to die—have mercy—neither do thou kill, nor yet disfigure me. I would have thee look no more upon me, when my beauty is all gone!”

Mahmoud’s threatening, triumphant smile stirred Fetneh to a vague resentment.

“Verily the ways of Allah are very wonderful! Now will the woman speak!”

He caught her suddenly and swiftly in his strong, resistless grasp; clasped a slender wrist in either hand, and, folding her arms relentlessly across her heaving breast, he so restrained her, powerless in his powerful grasp.

“What wouldst thou with me?”

In silence Mahmoud drew the massive silver girdle from about her waist—his own strange marriage-gift to her—and, placing her on the seat within the alcove, caught the chain firmly through some fastening on the wall. Then, with a sudden movement, as she lay helpless in his arms, he secured the chain to the bracelets on her wrists, so fettering her back against the richly-decorated wall. He tried the silver links, and the chain held fast and strong.

“Now, struggle as thou mayest, thou shalt not free thyself. This is the meaning of my marriage-gift to thee; the gift thou didst wonder at. Thou saidst: ‘Why givest me this?’ Now knowest thou. The Frank has cast his eyes upon thy beauty. Here will I keep thee, lest some other man’s eyes stray to thee, and peradventure he find favour in thy sight—and perchance steal thee from me.”

“Thou canst enchain my body, but my spirit still is free!”

“I will enchain thy spirit. Choose now—I have said.”

“I have chosen, Mahmoud. I will not open my lips in speech to thee again upon this matter.”

So Fetneh spoke, crouching impassively in the embrace of her own silver girdle; not vainly straining against her bonds, but quietly awaiting a swift death.

But death came not to her. Mahmoud’s gaze was fixed immovably upon her face, and his fine eyes were glowing like two smouldering fires. Fetneh, whose love he desired with all the fierce intensity characteristic of the Arab, apparently could not be overcome.

But with a cruel smile he said:—“I will not be provoked. I will still give thy stubborn spirit time

for repentance, that I may not lose my joy in thee, and the delights of thy embrace. And the light of thy countenance shall still rest on me, O Fetneh. I ask but to see thee day by day. If I see thee not, I thirst and hunger—say but thou to me: ‘My lord’s word is as other men’s oaths—I hear and I obey!’ ”

“Allah forbid! I obey thee not!”

“I thought vainly I was winning thee. False dawn!—False dawn! False dawn cometh before nightfall. And dayspring will not come!”

Then, for the first time, did Fetneh feel afraid. As she looked at him, a sudden, cruel, overwhelming terror came upon her. A swift death she did not fear—but torture—mutilation! Mahmoud, looking on her, read her thought, and smiled grimly, saying within himself:—

“I will yet break this woman’s stubborn spirit!”

He extinguished the alcove lamp. Holding a light high in his hand, he turned, and looked back at her with steady gaze before he went.

A difficult climb and crawl on all fours through the sand-tunnel he had made, and he was once more in the open air, half blinded by the warm sun of a new, fresh morning, after the cool darkness of the old mosque. For the brief dusk of the East was already spent.

He covered the opening, and, leaving the ruined mosque, he mounted his mare, and rode furiously away into the desert.

But Mahmoud's sufferings when away from Fetneh were very great. After many hours had passed, returning in the evening, he found the woman almost in a swoon.

"Art conquered yet?" he asked her roughly, because his pain was great.

"In the name of Allah, water!" she said, faintly.

Mahmoud loosed the woman's bonds.

"Kneel before me, then—kneel, O woman, at my feet!"

The woman knelt before him, and he raised his water-vessel to her lips.

"Thou hast come too late to free me," she said presently. "I have suffered much, O Mahmoud—look no more upon me, for my beauty is all gone!"

"How is thy heart, O beloved? Hast thou resolved to be obedient to thy lawful master?"

"O Allah, help me! O Lord, have I not suffered enough already? Who shall be my master?" she said haughtily, as she arose. "I am strong, the praise to Allah. What is thy pleasure with me, Sheikh? Is the appointed hour at hand?" asked Fetneh, calmly, as she feebly rose and stood before him. "If so, be

swift—for I am weary—I desire to die! Be thou merciful, that Allah's wrath may be averted from thee. Lo! here are all thy gifts to me—these pearls—these precious stones—but death will be thy last, best gift to me!”

Mahmoud looked upon her, but he answered not.

“Am I to die? Great is thy goodness to me!”

Fetneh cast a strange look at her husband. There was a kind of gratitude in it—something infinitely helpless, something childlike. All her fierce and fiery bitterness was gone.

Kneeling at his feet again, she kissed his hand, and placed it on her head.

“Allah is the only Allah—the All-Merciful. Be thou merciful to me, lest the consuming wrath of Allah fall upon thee. Sin not, I entreat thee!”

Mahmoud turned his face away from her, and pulled his burnouse over his eyes, and stood in gloomy silence. He felt his own impotence, and his heart ached pitifully. But there was no suggestion of relenting in his face as Fetneh knelt before him.

“What wouldst thou?”

“Let it rest yet for a little time, O stubborn one!”

The sudden return of hope brought an intolerable, unutterable, momentary pain with it to Fetneh.

With difficulty she restrained herself from crying out. These last hours had set their mark on her. She had crouched here in the darkness, chained and terrified, looking a slow and cruel, solitary death full in the face. Awaiting the will of Allah, as she thought, almost stupified with fear and fatalism.

Fetneh had bowed her head in silent resignation. Because "It was written" was enough for the Arab woman. It was to be accepted. It was Kismet. The fatalism of her race—the fatalism that lies always at the root of the Moslem faith—had been strong upon this woman. But now the effort to refrain from crying out appalled her.

Then Mahmoud said:—

"Here will I leave thee, O Fetneh! And this I tell thee—that by now the Frank is gone away with the Bedouins of the desert to his captivity.

"How long will his captivity last?" she asked.

"Until thy ransom shall be paid to me, O stubborn one!" he answered coldly, looking on her with his dark, intolerant eyes.

"Allah is the only Allah—and Allah loves those who are merciful. Be merciful, and gain the smile of Allah! Here on earth wilt thou gain Allah's smile, and the joys of Paradise will all be thine; they will await thee in the life to come. Have

mercy, therefore, Mahmoud Bey! Take my life, and let the Frank go free!"

"Allah is great, and Mahomet is His Prophet!" he said, with a hard look.

He deigned no other answer.

He chained up again the helpless and enfeebled woman, worn out by her emotions and sufferings, in the same fashion as before, and, taking the lamp away with him, extinguished it outside in the courtyard of the mosque.

At last, the cry hovering on Fetneh's lips escaped, in spite of her hard effort at control.

"Allah Beh!"

One piteous and plaintive, melancholy cry.

The low wail from the darkness followed Mahmoud as he left the ruined temple, and came out into the moonlight, a sound of unutterable sadness and despair; and Mahmoud shook from head to foot; but still he closed his ears to it remorselessly, that he might not hear, lest he be tempted to relent.

As he finished scraping up the sand again to conceal the opening as before, where he had entered, Feyruzah whinnied softly to him. The Arab cast his arms about his mare's neck, and she rubbed her gentle head against his bosom.

"Wouldst thou betray thy lord, O Feyruzah, or thy lord's love, like all thy sex?"

The mare appeared to gaze at him with deep reproach in her full, dark, liquid eye, and he caressed her, and sprang on her back.

Suddenly the thrilling cry of a woman in great anguish rang through the silent night. Mahmoud turning sharply, gazed in the direction of the sound, lifting one hand to his ear. He blanched suddenly, biting his lips fiercely, till the blood came, to control himself—but he went on. Fetneh's last despairing cry became absorbed once more into the mastering silence of the lonely desert.

But the plaintive moan of Fetneh's prayer still rang painfully in his ears, and followed him in fancy, as he galloped madly away in the faint moonlight like one pursued, across the rolling plain. And he could not forget that last wild and imploring, anguished look that she had cast upon him as he left the Mosque. The plaintive moan of Fetneh's prayer seemed to tremble with infinite melancholy over the rolling plain.

But an hour later he was riding back again; drawn to the old Mosque as by a powerful and resistless magnet that draws a piece of hard insensate iron. For he had felt a sudden yearning strong within his breast to look upon her face again—to return and comfort her. He loved the woman. Only his death could alter that. That at present



was his sole thought, and it was enough for him. The huge silent moonlit waste was all around him, without a sign of the oasis he had lately left. Yet Fetneh's cry rang strongly in his ears through the night. He stood silently stroking his horse's neck, and turned his troubled eyes towards the dark green line of the horizon. Then he slowly mounted to return.

At length he came to the edge of the oasis. The moon saw Mahmoud standing with the white hood of his burnouse drawn forward over his head. Worn out with his violent emotion and exertion, he lay down to sleep beneath the palms, and wait for morning. He felt that, without rest, he had no power to enter yet.

The stars shone with a pure serenity overhead. The blue overhead turned into violet—the green leaves into black; then the stars shone out once more between the crowns of the palm-trees in the oasis, and between the straight stems of the palms. The great green leaves swished slowly up above him in the faint night breeze. Then the weird and overwhelming, wonderful silence of the Eastern desert night claimed its inheritance.

Mahmond lay sleeping there at last, worn out, beneath the palms of the oasis, near the ruined

Mosque where Fetneh was held captive in her silver chain.

A stronger breath of the cool wind came over the flats, and all the palm-trees rustled. There was a faint stir of life throughout the oasis. A bird flew across the shadowy space beneath the trees. Then there was the sudden Eastern change from darkest night to sunrise.

In the early dawn Mahmoud Bey awoke, and made his way again into the ancient temple, where, once more, he lighted, in the alcove, the old Moorish lamp. Then he turned, agonised, to look upon the woman.

Drooping within the loop of her own silver girdle, in all the richness of her wedding finery, her head forlornly resting on her breast; in that dusky, lonely, decorated place, with unseen death—Mahmoud knew it now instinctively—concealed in all the deadly cracks and crannies of the crumbling walls; where the rich, decorative arabesques seemed but cruel mockery.

As he raised the woman in his arms, from her still bosom fell a scorpion. Mahmoud saw the writhing, deadly horror which had brought the woman whom he loved to the great silence. A grey hue was on his lips; a strange and tender pity in

his brooding face as he hung over her. He sank at Fetneh's feet.

“I was cruel to thee, beloved—O, woman of my soul. Yet I loved thee, thou ill-starred, ill-fated Fetneh! It is the will of Allah! La illah il' Allah!”

The Bride of Death—not Mahmoud Bey! He gently raised her head until it rested on his bosom, and burning tears fell from those once resolutely-hard and tearless eyes, as he kissed the dead face tenderly, with all his former violence and passion gone.

## CHAPTER XII.

After Fetneh's Marriage Festival was over, the English party, all unknowing of her tragic fate, made preparation to set forward the next day upon a shorter journey, further in the desert.

They rested on the way with Douhi, sheikh of a village consisting of a few mud and thatch huts, with its poor little stock of goats and kine and pigeons. Douhi was a man of thirty-four, with the face of a desert eagle; of dark complexion, fine features, black head, beard, and moustache. His face was sensual, but not sufficiently so to detract from his good looks.

"Black blood shows itself in this Arab's slightly thick and heavy lips," said Middleton to Mr. Cleveland.

"His slightly overhanging lids give his dark eyes an occasional curious look of lassitude quite out of keeping with his face," said Mr. Cleveland, thoughtfully.

Douhi presently requested an interview with the English party. He stood for some minutes stroking his black beard, while his bold eyes glanced

from one face to another. He suddenly addressed himself in Arabic to Miss Seraphina:—

“Wouldst be willing to lead a desert life—to share my douar with me as thy chosen lord and husband—away from thine own people?”

Miss Seraphina had only acquired a useless smattering of Arabic, and, not rightly understanding him, but seeing that she was courteously addressed, merely bowed and smiled for answer. The Arab smiled gently in his beard. His piercing black eyes stared her calmly out of countenance. He presently spoke again.

“What does he say now?” inquired Miss Seraphina, uneasily. “I cannot follow him. Was it not something about a welcome to his desert home?”

Ali began to interpret to her in the exaggerated flowery Oriental language of courtesy of the East.

“In the early dawn, before ye marched, the sheikh Douhi visited the camels at the well to see them watered for the start. On the way back to his own tent, he saw by chance, unveiled, the stately Frankish woman, whom he heard giving just reproof unto an erring servant. And his heart was set on fire by her stateliness and queenly beauty, and by the words of wisdom that fell from her tongue; so that he now desires her for his wife, and asks her hand in marriage. He offers her a hearty welcome to his desert home!”

Thus smilingly interpreted the suave and smooth-tongued Ali, in the usual flowery language of compliment common to Orientals.

“Douhi desires the hand of this Queen of the Morning—of this Lady of Light!” said the delighted Dick.

“This is rather sudden!” Miss Seraphina faltered, feebly, with a stricken look, not altogether untouched by the delicate flattery. “Tell the sheikh I think very highly of his offer, though, of course, I cannot accept it—but I consider him a perfect desert gentleman!”

“Bravo! Our Aunt Seraphina must have kissed the Blarney Stone!” cried Dick.

“If she did, she did so without ever knowing it!” exclaimed her brother.

“’Tis better to have kissed in vain than not at all!” said Dick, sententiously.

Then said Ali, interpreting, this time without the Oriental courtesy:—

“Douhi also says he desires the stately woman for his wife because she will bring good dowry, and make good manager of his unruly harem. He will make the woman his chief wife, and she will obey him, but will rule his harem.”

“Striving to better, oft we mar what’s well!” said Dick. “Mahomet and the mountain, with a

vengeance—and Aunt Seraphina! You can take a horse to the water, but you can't make him drink! And moreover, two-tongued Ali reminds me of the two-tailed pointer dog. He was taken his first gunning, and the minute he saw a bird his tail stiffened like a ramrod. Suddenly the tip of his tail appeared to open up a little, and then it split down the whole length. He was a cross-eyed dog, and he'd been trying to point the bird the way it looked to him! Oh! ye faithful followers of the Prophet! Douhi wants to marry our Aunt Seraphina!"

"Wants to marry me!" exclaimed Miss Seraphina, frantically, now thoroughly enlightened, and totally unable to believe her ears. "The wretch! Me—an Englishwoman—to be made chief wife, forsooth, and manager of his unruly, miserable harem!"

"Oh! how she'd manage 'em!" interpolated Dick. "Some are born to greatness; some achieve greatness; but Aunt Seraphina has had greatness thrust upon her!"

"I will only marry where I can respect and love," remarked Miss Seraphina.

"I'll only wed a man whose step is music to mine ear!" said Dick.

"I should be giving up all that I had in life, if I stayed here!" mused Miss Seraphina, much ex-

asperated, yet with a sort of indecision in her tones.

“You have nothing to give up,” said Mr. Cleveland, brusquely; “especially in the way of the most ordinary common-sense!”

The sheikh now spoke again, and Ali interpreted.

“Douhi would know the Frankish woman’s answer!”

“Is the courtship coming on apace?” asked Dick, with interest.

Her white umbrella held upbraidingly above her head, Miss Seraphina, goaded thus, marched a step or two upon the sheikh. In this valorous attitude, her admiring and aspiring suitor regarded her with fresh approval.

Another tall sheikh came forward at this moment to inspect her coldly with his hard, dark eyes, under very thick, black brows. He had a very dark complexion and black beard, and his white flowing garments made him appear darker.

“Sherlock Holmes never wanted what he had aspired to, when he found he couldn’t get it,” murmured Dick. “He’s my model—he turned aside to other things, when things he had aspired to proved unattainable. But Douhi seems to want Aunt Seraphina more because he cannot get her. What is the sheikh saying?”



“This woman is not young or fair, my brother!” the sheikh said to Douhi, in Arabic.

“Nevertheless, I would have this woman for a wife, and manager of my harem,” replied Douhi, persistently, his Arab obstinacy further roused by the denial.

“She is neither of thy race, nor of thy faith.”

“Oolah—Allah Akbar! God is great. Praise to Allah, we may change the woman’s heart, and Allah will change her faith!”

“Please yourself,” Dick murmured, “and you can be certain of pleasing at least one person!”

Miss Seraphina still stood with her umbrella up in attitude of defence.

“The woman is old, and is not handsome,” said the other sheikh.

“What does he say?” inquired Miss Seraphina, piteously.

Ali interpreted again without the flowery Oriental style and Eastern phrasing.

“He says thou art old, and very ugly!”

“Where is my umbrella?” cried Miss Seraphina, wildly.

“Held up high above your head!” said Dick. “But temper the wind gently to this poor shorn lamb! There’s many a slip ’twixt cup and lip—

Douhi's not accustomed to refusals; has but lately learnt this lesson."

"Ay—ah! Ay—ah! Stoppa! Backa!" cried Miss Seraphina, in her limited Arabie.

Her umbrella descended heavily upon the turban of the hostile sheikh. As he straightened his turban again from the blow, he merely ran his dark eyes over her tall, straight form approvingly. Douhi was regarding her with calm approval and bold admiration, which was evidently much increased by her late attack upon his brother sheikh.

"I understand now thy great love and admiration for this woman," said the hostile sheikh to Douhi. "O Lady, the light of thy countenance is now upon me also!"

"Arabs evidently like a little spirit in a woman!" murmured Diek.

"Fain would I lead men gently with a silken string," Miss Seraphina murmured, smirking, on the sheikh's words being repeated to her by her delighted nephew, as she turned modestly away.

"Drag men with a halter or a camel's nose-rope, rather!" muttered Diek, satirically.

The two sheikhs accompanied them part of the way on their return journey to the douar of Ahmed Bey, and leaving them, went home again to their own douars.

Mr. Cleveland was rather uneasy respecting the last looks of Douhi at Miss Seraphina.

"I am afraid of Douhi's vengeance," he exclaimed. "Did you notice his black looks at us on the departure of our caravan?"

"Oh, nonsense," said his son. "The muddiest water'll settle, if you only let it alone."

"He is angry because he could not get what he desired. And Arabs are not used to these refusals."

"Perhaps he wanted it because he couldn't get it!"

Ahmed Bey received the party coldly, and without his former display of cordiality. He accorded them not his former hearty welcome. He soon suggested to them a further expedition, to which they acceded. Ahmed Bey's countenance was graver than usual; he appeared disturbed; and it was evident that when he conducted his guests out of camp, and had set them fairly on their way one morning, for some unknown private reason their departure was a great relief to him.

"It appears to be a decided case of welcome the coming, speed the parting guest," said Dick, when, after a hearty breakfast, they left the village of Ahmed Bey and pursued their journey, their

host providing them with an escort for a portion of the way.

"It is our Kismet!" Middleton said, grimly.

"I've heard, said Dick, "that their idea of Kismet may be illustrated thus: If an Arab sits upon a pin, he merely says, it was written; and calmly replaces the offending instrument of pain for someone else's Kismet. He's of the same school of philosophy as Mrs. Squeers. 'Malesch!' says the Arab, come what may. 'It'll be all the same to me a hundred years hence!' "

They had a long and weary ride that day, and were glad to reach their tents in the evening.

"What a busy and welcoming scene is the encampment after the day's ride," said Cecil to Middleton, as they approached.

"The Arabs and camels appear picturesque, thus scattered about in groups," responded Middleton. "Many of the former seated round their blazing fires."

"The tents are all lighted up with Eastern lamps; the tent doors thrown wide open—the Arabs are moving about from tent to tent; Mustafa, with his gay laugh, and old Ibrahim in his grave and silent fashion."

The snarl of camels was audible from a small passing train. Then, as evening wore on and night-

fall came, and the sounds of the encampment gradually ceased, dying gently away into a total silence, Mr. Cleveland retired to the tent he shared with Dick and Middleton; and the women went to bed in their own tent.

The Arabs were already sleeping by their dying-out fire.

## CHAPTER XIII.

Mr. Cleveland, who had felt unusually fatigued, was now asleep. Middleton, who could not sleep, went to the entrance of the tent he shared with him, and looked out upon the night. He could hear the jackals yelping in the far distance, but it was the only occasional sound that broke the stillness. He quietly opened the curtain of the tent, and a pure flood of moonlight poured through the opening. He stepped outside. He longed to be alone in the great starlit solitude of the waste beyond, to think.

As he passed the women's tent he heard the voice of Cecil softly call his name. The faint scent of his cigar had reached her through the partly-opened door of the tent.

"Is that you, Mr. Middleton?"

"It is I, Miss Beresford. I am taking a short stroll before I go to bed. Good night!"

"Good night!" the girl responded, drowsily.

Middleton passed on, and presently he stepped outside the encircling encampment on to the dim waste beyond. As he passed, an Arab stealthily

raised his head where he lay amongst his fellows by the dying-out fire, and looked after him for a moment with attention, till he disappeared from view. Then he cautiously arose and followed him.

Middleton was standing motionless, absorbed in thought, where his figure could be only just discerned in the dim light. Beyond him was the vague and shadowy desert.

The moon was now obscured by passing clouds. He lingered, watching the moon rise again, till his cigar was smoked out. The desert was soon flooded with a clear silver stream from the moon rays.

A low, distant sound rose suddenly behind a sand dune on his left hand. He resolved to investigate, and mounted the low hill, treading the crisp sand underfoot, and descended into the fold of desert beyond it; he paused there for a moment, out of sight of the camp, and looked around him, listening to the sighing of the slight fitful wind that had arisen, as he observed the darkening sky.

A larger cloud obscured the face of the moon. He felt a sudden, sharp gust of wind upon his cheek, and, in the dark, a multitude of sand grains were blown smartly against his face.

In a few seconds, had he been on guard, he might have seen that single figure creep, like a dark, furtive shadow, from somewhere out of the

dimness of the plain, and cautiously approach him from behind. In a moment an Arab cloak was flung about his head and shoulders, and Middleton, stifled and blinded by the heavy folds, was dragged towards a camel that was waiting near, and was roughly flung upon the saddle. The camel was then instantly driven forward.

Middleton's unknown captor stopped the camel at some distance from the caravan, commanded it to kneel, and secured his captive with a camel halter, his head still remaining muffled in the aba, till he was nearly suffocated. He then set him once more upon the camel, and they journeyed on.

It had the effect of a nightmare on Middleton, for there was no sound save the dull padding of the camel's feet on the soft sand. Soon he remembered in a sudden flash the dark night, late hour, and the unbroken silence of the sleeping camp. He knew that he was being carried away from his own caravan into the silent desert, helpless in some unknown, ruthless hands.

By-and-bye some kind of stir around him told him that some change he could not see was taking place. He fancied that they had been joined, or passed, by a body of camel-men. The moon had risen to the full, and was gleaming brightly through a rift of cloud, and the aba round his head



becoming disarranged in his vain endeavours to free himself, he could see, through a fold in it, shrouded horsemen in the dusk, a straggling line of riders some way off, ahead of him, and he began to hope for help. His captor was still walking at the camel's head and leading it.

The Arabs in front now turned, and, pausing, waved their lances, as though they made some signal to a comrade; and when they came up with the party, Middleton discovered, to his chagrin, that his captor belonged to it, and his friends were evidently waiting for him, with a mount. He took his seat upon a camel, and they all went forward at a steady pace.

It was like a dream to Middleton, the strangeness, and the absolute silence of it, as he was borne forward upon those soft, shuffling, sponge-like feet, and saw the swaying figures of the Arabs on each side of him. The long line of camels moved on as quietly as phantoms, bearing on to unknown haven these mysterious and silent men.

They passed on over the soft sand in silence only broken by the gentle sougling of the wind, and the ceaseless shuffle of the camels' feet padding upon the sand. Not a murmur broke the stillness anywhere—not the faintest sound. Before and behind him were the absolutely silent, swaying, white

figures of the Arabs; and he concluded that he had been captured by a stray band of the Wandering Bedouins; perhaps in hope he might be ransomed by his friends.

For several hours he travelled thus, painfully stiff and cramped, and aching in every limb; then the camel stopped again; he heard the sound of a guttural Arab voice; the camel knelt; and then he was taken down, the muffling aba falling altogether from his face.

Middleton struggled vainly, for two strong Arabs held him by each arm, and a couple of quick turns with a camel halter further secured his wrists. Then he was roughly thrust within a tent, and he could hear them talking together in low guttural voices just outside.

The darkness of night was changing to dawn when he was brought forth again, and half a dozen motionless, white figures were visible, standing in an attitude of patient waiting by the tent in the cold breath of coming dawn.

As the light grew stronger, a dark face peered steadily at him from under a peaked Arab hood. His captors had lighted a brushwood fire to warm themselves, and it blazed cheerfully as they piled it up, and some of them proceeded to make coffee, whilst the rest lay down beside the fire. Middleton looked

drearily from the tent door upon the lonely dunes. They released him from his bonds, but looked harshly and forbiddingly upon him when he attempted to question them.

Middleton was thankful for the warmth of the fire and freedom to stretch his cramped and aching limbs. He vainly spoke to the Arabs; they made no response, and they took no further notice of him. But though they did not interfere with him, he knew they watched his movements closely. There was no hope whatever of any chance of an escape. Around him he saw grim desolation; around him stretched a wild and sterile country. Nothing grew here but the wiry desert grass, a few stunted bushes, and many cactus shrubs. In the midst of the vastness, immense tracts of land faded away into far blue distances. A dreary silence prevailed, save for the padding of the camels' feet, and the harsh occasional voices of the Arabs.

Soon the tent was struck, and again as they travelled forward in the early morning Middleton peered back continually for the help that never came. An hour after sunrise his captors called another halt, and food and water were shared amongst them all, Middleton receiving a small portion.

The desolation here was complete. All around

lay sand dunes, and here and there saltpetre lay white upon the dreary waste. Middleton, travelling with his captors through this desolation, looked drearily across the distant flats, but could see nothing but a thin line of white bones, drawn without a break across the plains, from one horizon to another, showing an old caravan route, where the track was strewn with the bleached bones of camels that had perished on some long desert march. The immense spaces of the desert were now bathed in the afternoon sun, and it shone upon them brightly.

They passed through a sand-storm over an arid plain. By-and-bye they camped near some rough bushes, and when night came, Middleton suffered much from cold, for there was a chill breeze. And though the Arabs wrapped themselves up in their abas, they gave Middleton no extra covering. They had camped in a hollow, and he could see the camels against the sky-line, as he tried to wait with patience for the dawn, and for the journey's end.

Then came the pitiless gold of a new dawn, and the next day, in its turn, brought him an equal amount of suffering from thirst and heat, as he was roughly jolted on the camel's back over the hot sand and stones. He raised sun-wearied and despairing eyes to the horizon. By this time he was consumed

with thirst, and scorched almost to the bone. He was only conscious of the sun, the sky, and the burning, dusty atmosphere through which they rode.

“In the name of Allah, water!” he said painfully to his grimly silent captors.

One Arab, more kind-hearted than the rest, guided his camel near, and gave him his skin-bottle containing water. Middleton raised it eagerly to his parched lips and drank, and gratefully thanked the Arab as he gave it back.

All that day they journeyed steadily till they came to a water-pool. They camped there for food and rest; filled their water-bottles, watered their camels, and ate their allowance of dates and doora, giving Middleton a scanty share.

Though they could see none travelling, by-and-bye they saw some far-away camels grazing, mere specks upon the empty space of earth and sky. The ground here rose gently and continuously for some time before they saw in the distance some pitched tents, with the dark forms of some mules and camels.

Their journey ended next morning at a Bedouin village on the skirt of the desert edge, the border and extreme confine of the Sahara and Sudan. A few mud and thatch huts, and a “ghima” or two, was where these Wandering Bedouins had their abode. The village was pitched in a circle, each

tent or hut touching its near neighbour, so that there was no way into the circle except by the one entrance, which was always closed at night by a high stack of brambles.

Beyond the village, a number of goats were browsing on the wiry desert grass, and some camels were lying down. A number of brown Arab children swarmed about. The busy women of the douar ceased their labours to approach him, staring at the stranger with unabashed curiosity. The desert men crowded about him with their strong, fierce countenances, hailing the Bedouins who had arrived, with the peculiar accented violence usual with the Arabs. And an old sheikh came out to the doorway of his tent.

He made an extremely unpleasant impression on Middleton as the Arabs led their captive up to him. He struck him as being possibly the greatest scoundrel. Middleton regarded his captors with a stern and set expression on his countenance, but with no sign of the uneasiness he felt at heart. They all regarded him with fierce animosity and strong dislike, staring at him with fanatical and cruel, ruthless eyes.

“The Shereef—the British Consul—ransom!” Middleton exclaimed, in curt Arabic.

The sheikh regarded him in silence, as he stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"I am an Englishman," said Middleton, addressing him eagerly. "Take me back to my own caravan, or to the tents of the sheikh, Ahmed Bey, and you shall have reward. I will pay you well if you will have me ransomed. Take me to the English Consul, if you prefer, at Morocco or Algiers."

"Thou wilt give us gold?"

The old sheikh turned eagerly to the Bedouins who had captured Middleton, and consulted with them aside.

"Doubtless the Frank can pay us well if we ransom him," he said. "Pay in golden pieces."

"There hath been command that he should not be ransomed, but should be delivered into perpetual and hopeless slavery," objected the leader of the party that had abducted Middleton.

The Arabs of the douar called down maledictions on the unknown commander's head.

"May the smile of Allah be upon him!" commented the old sheikh, sarcastically.

"We must ask the sheikh of all the sheikhs about this matter, O brother!" said another Arab.

"Allah be praised that we have him to ask!" said the old sheikh maliciously.

He sent the other Arabs presently about their

business, and sat upon the sand before his hut. He looked at Middleton attentively, with crafty eyes.

“How shall I know that the Frank will pay me the promised ransom?” he said presently, with a subtle and cunning look on his wrinkled face. “Though he speaketh boastfully, yet he may be poor. Let the stranger speak. If he indeed be rich in his own land, perchance he may be ransomed. What dost thou say?”

His dark eyes flamed with the light of greed. Middleton could see that it would be an easy matter to whet that appetite, already so voracious.

“I am rich in my own country. If I give you gold,” said Middleton, in his best Arabic, “will you set me free?”

A gleam of suspicion came in the old Bedouin’s eyes.

“How much wilt thou pay? I must have large gift of ransom,” he said, impatiently.

“I will give large gift on my release. Go to the other Arabs and arrange the matter with them. Go! Allah will reward you, if you help me. Let me pay my ransom and go free!”

He saw again the sheikh’s expression of great greed, and waited hopefully for his words to have effect.



The old Bedouin named a large sum of money to him.

“I cannot take less, Sidi! I am a poor man.”

“I will pay you what you ask,” said Middleton.

He knew that with the Children of the East it is the silent man who gets the best of an argument. He therefore said no more, and the Arab departed presently and went away to consider the matter privily before consulting with the rest, for the offered ransom was not to be lightly refused.

The Bedouins of the douar were sitting about on sand heaps in the shadow of some thorn trees, as it grew hot. The sheikh, approaching them, they argued together for some time, with apparent violence.

To Middleton, the half-hour that passed seemed an eternity; his heart was sickening with suspense of hope deferred. Now and then he could hear fragments of their arguments, the wild-eyed desert men uttering terrible maledictions.

“He is an Infidel!”

“Absolute Unbeliever!”

“Dog of a Christian!”

“Why should we help an Infidel to escape—an Unbeliever of Mahomet’s faith?”

“Nay,” said the old sheikh, craftily, “what

matters his belief to us, if he leaves the country, and we have the ransom?"

"Nay--by Mahomet's beard, we will sell him at Timbuctoo!"

"There will the Unbeliever have his daily portion of the whip, and the bastinado--and we the gold!"

In the end, the old sheikh mused apart awhile, and then returned to the expectant Middleton. He smiled at him with gentle resignation. He told him that the Bedouins greatly feared the wrath of Mahmoud Bey if they should set him free.

"I cannot ransom thee at present. Be content, then, to remain here at our tents. Peradventure it is the will of Allah that thou shouldst become a slave, to toil in the Sahara."

Middleton could not restrain a gesture of despair. His movement drew the old sheikh's sinister and cunning eyes upon him.

"Perchance here thou wilt become one of the true sons of the Prophet--embrace the true religion? Allah doth all things well!"

"You will not aid me, then, in any way?" exclaimed Middleton, desperately.

The old Arab smiled cunningly, and shook his head, but did not answer. Then he went away, and Middleton was taken to a hut.

A murmur of many voices reached his ears from outside in the desert; loud guttural cries that sounded angry, and the snarls of camels. The noise became more pressing, sounded nearer, till at last a wild troop of Bedouins approached the hut.

The sight of these wild, thronging, desert men, the light from their ferocious, gleaming eyes made Middleton feel hot, and the harsh clamour from their throats excited him. They roused within him anger and disgust. Involuntarily he made a gesture of repulsion.

Instantly a crowd of dark faces and turbaned heads were thrust through the opening of the hut; a number of dusky hands were shaken menacingly, and the hoarse cry of threatening voices rose into an almost deafening uproar. Then the old sheikh appeared, with angry countenance, saying a few words, sharply; the clamour ceased, and the Bedouins went silently away.

The time dragged slowly by; the sun blazed pitilessly down. Middleton suffered greatly as he sat in the low doorway of the mud hut, silently watching the smoke curl up from the Bedouins' fires into the hot glare of the sun; and the lizards creeping slowly over the hot, baked earth.

The afternoon wore on. A flock of goats tripped slowly by, followed by two little Arab boys in

rags. One of the boys was playing with some skill upon a pipe covered with red arabesques. Into the village, for the night, the flocks and herds were driven, as raids by other Bedouin tribes were not by any means infrequent here. And still he sat and watched, with hopeless eyes, the sun go down.

Then out on the warm, clear air came a long-drawn chanting call:—

“Allah! Allah Akbar!”

The cry was taken up by other voices.

“It is the call to evening prayer,” said a fierce-eyed Arab to Middleton; “and the faithful will now answer it. Soon wilt thou obey it, too! May Allah incline thy mind to receive the truth!”

He passed on, a fanatical, stern look of warning in his sombre eyes.

“Allah! Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!”

The sounds came with strange pleading from those hoarse, brown throats, and fierce, bearded lips; passing over the boundless confines of the sterile desert.

“Allah! Allah Akbar!”

The plaintive melancholy murmuring of prayer swelled forth on many voices into the infinite and boundless spaces of the silent, rolling plains.

Worn out, exhausted, Middleton sank now into despair and silent apathy. A young and comely

Bedouin woman brought him a bowl of milk and a smoking dish of kous-kous, and set it pityingly by his side, as he sat brooding. He drank the fresh milk eagerly, but could not touch the other food.

Left quite alone, he remembered now, for the first time, the strange and high-bred Arab girl whose affection and advances he had formerly repulsed—and now it flashed into his mind that perhaps this was her vengeance—the wild and unrestrained, unreasoning vengeance of the wild and unrestrained, unreasoning Children of the Desert.

He attempted to forget that former scene of passion; trying to believe that it meant nothing. The Children of the East he knew to be free and capricious; they were the creatures of mere impulse; mysterious, impulsive, and imperious by turns; and also very changeable in their desires. But he recalled her wild, fierce words of threatening, compared with the result, and hope therewith sank sickened in his breast.

He ceased now to marvel at the dominant strong chord of fatalism—at the tenacious, fatalistic philosophy of all the Arab race.

“Kismet!” he reflected, with a ghastly smile. “Am I becoming, then, a fatalist myself, like all the Arabs here? Kismet? Does Allah truly will it? Allah wills it. It is written! It is my fate—

it is my destiny—it is my strange, predestined lot—May Allah accord me, then, the patient resignation of the Arab nature, and a stoical, endurant sufferance of the hopeless and inevitable. Kismet—fate—my destiny—whatever that may chance to be!”

For a while the sound of voices floated in to him, mingling with the dry rustle of the few palm-trees stirring in a rising breeze.

But that night was feverish, oppressive, strange to him. The unwonted, insufferable torment of great thirst in the late journey hither, beneath a burning sun, had had a cruel effect on him; and although the cool night breeze had now sprung up, in a kind of half delirium he seemed to wander, lost and solitary, in the wilderness; and to hear strange, faint echoes of long-silent voices of the friends that he had known—men’s voices—women’s voices—even the soft murmuring of children; and never-ceasing, impotent, wearisome, and monotonous murmuring to them for help rose to his hot, parched lips.

Next day he felt much better, and the delirium had passed away from him. He was given a mud hut, and kept close prisoner, but he was not ill-treated. He was left much alone; but he knew that he was watched continually.

Being himself a captive, he thought constantly of Arthur as a possible prisoner. And his bitter

anguish was increased greatly by the thought that he was powerless now, indeed, to seek and rescue him.

## CHAPTER XIV.

Meantime, at the camp in the morning, they had missed Middleton. In the soft soil outside the encampment they found tell-tale marks as of a scuffle, and they saw the spoor of the camel on which Middleton was thrown; they noticed that it led far out into the waste beyond. They followed it awhile, until they lost the tracks where a light wind had blown the sand upon them. There was much wonder and much tribulation over the mystery of his unaccountable disappearance. The caravan was delayed there for some time for consultation, for they knew not where to turn.

"He may have started on an early ride behind the sandhills, and may soon return," Dick said, hopefully.

"But that is unusual," objected Mr. Cleveland; "and in the East, it is quite possible that anything might chance to a solitary traveller. We know the East to be unchangeable. And we must remember that here we are beyond all civilisation. It is like



looking in a bushel of chaff for a single grain of wheat."

He went to consult with Ibrahim and Mustafa regarding routes, and the two women sat down side by side together beneath the shelter of a palm-tree; Miss Seraphina staring with disconsolate and stony countenance across the sterile sultry waste. She paid but scant attention to Cecil's words at first; but her niece contrived ere long to coax some little hope into her aunt's despairing heart, for Cecil put aside her own sad thoughts to cheer and comfort her companion.

"Besides," thought Cecil, pensively, "all our fears may, after all, prove groundless, and he may be safe!"

Next day, at dawn, the caravan went on its way, winding further into the desert in a futile search of Middleton.

The first thing that Cecil heard the morning after, was that an Arab had brought tidings in the night that a quarrel had arisen between Ahmed Bey and his cousin Mahmoud Bey. This was unfortunate, as they had intended returning to his village to ask the aid of Ahmed Bey in their attempted search for Middleton. And they had meant to take his douar first thing, in their line of travel.

Cecil found the messenger resting for break-

fast by a cluster of dwarf olives, eating bread and dates, his dromedary near awaiting his departure. And he told her that Meshow, who had been absent on a journey from the douar of Ahmed Bey, would reach their camp that night.

In the evening, from the doorway of her tent, Cecil saw the party of their own Arabs seated quietly in a circle round their blazing fire in a dead, unwonted silence. The firelight played on their impassive faces, and beyond them was the shadowy desert. In a few moments a single figure came from somewhere out of the dim plain, and slowly approached the party. To her intense relief and joy, it was Meshow.

Next morning Cecil rose at dawn, and on leaving her own tent she found Meshow busy about the encampment. She came eagerly towards him and entreated him for news.

"I have this hour received sure tidings of the Frank," he said at once in a cautious undertone, that the Arabs might not hear. "A Bedouin told me that a Frank traveller who has been lately captured by his tribe, is being taken away to be held captive in the mud huts of a douar belonging to the Wandering Bedouins, far beyond Sus. He said: 'He will afterwards be brought as a slave to Timbuctoo, and there will be sold. To-morrow they

will pack their tents and go over the hills, and along the rolling plains towards Timbuctoo. They will travel over the Great Desert of Sahara, beyond Sus, over which lies the route to Timbuctoo and the Sudan. There seek ye him!’ He said this to me—no more—because I had once been his friend. Yet, from one village to another, throughout the whole Sudan, might ye, unaided, vainly seek the Frank!’”

“Then Mr. Middleton has been actually forced away?” said Cecil.

“He hath indeed been forced away by stealth at night—this have I learnt.”

A grave and anxious look appeared in Cecil’s deeply brooding face.

“Will they take him, for certain, to the Sudan, or the slave markets of Morocco—or perhaps Timbuctoo?”

“Most likely they will take him to Timbuctoo— instant search must, then, be made for him.”

“He might be killed,” said Cecil, hurriedly, “if he be not found and rescued soon.”

“There is danger, O lady—it perhaps means death for him—or hopeless, certain slavery in the Sudan.”

“Is there no one who has power to help us in our time of need?”

“Thanks be to Allah! There is one who hath

power to discover the Frank's whereabouts. The Great Solitary Sheikh will soon discover him if I should fail. The Solitary One hath great influence amongst the Arabs, because they have a superstitious reverence for him. We believe he is Mahomet's chosen Prophet. I will send my messenger unto the Solitary Sheikh, that the Frank may be sought soon. Nevertheless, I, too, will soon depart upon a search for him. Lest the Solitary Sheikh by chance be absent from his douar upon some pilgrimage, I must hasten, meantime, to discover him unaided by the Sheikh, lest the Frank perchance be put to death whilst we are tarrying. There is yet another who can help me—even him with whom I spoke before, and I know where to find him. But I shall have to promise him much gold in ransom. So shall the Frank have life instead of death."

"They will ransom him?" she questioned, eagerly.

"I know not," he answered moodily.

"They will not take his life—they have no cause!"

An anguished look came now in Cecil's eyes.

"Mahmoud Bey, mine uncle, was jealous of the Frank for his newly-married wife, the woman Fetneh. And Mahmoud Bey is treacherous and cruel.

This did I learn from Nasli, the black slave, her favourite attendant."

"Mr. Middleton is very rich in his own country—and I am wealthy, too. Stint not for gold, so you but rescue him. Make big promise for it, and it shall be found!"

"Not a hair of the Frank's head shall be hurt, if I have power to help him," answered Meshow, earnestly. "I sorrow with thee. O lady! Meantime, trust in Allah. He is all-powerful! And give me present opportunity to speak with thee again."

That night, Cecil lay musing in her little camp-bed in the tent, round which the desert winds were sighing gently. There was a moon, and she could not sleep. She lay in bed and thought, while the moonbeams, stealing in between the tent pegs, kept her company. Turning restlessly upon her pillow, she saw the moonbeams, and got up, and went softly to the tent door. All the vast plain was bathed in light. She gazed out far away across the sand on which shone the silvery haze; for the whole world seemed to sleep in silver. And Cecil clasped her hands together in the silent misery of her reflections.

"I have truly cared for John," she thought, "although I knew it not. And to think that I have

missed the joy of telling him. Ah! if only I had power to let him know it now!"

She was quiet for a little, musing painfully.

"I have always cared for him," she thought again. "But I think that I cared most when he told me of his quest in the Great Desert. John is noble-minded and unselfish—there is not his like upon the earth! Ah! where is he now?"

Sick at heart, she turned her face away to gaze sorrowfully into the misty distance, silent and desolate, in silent desolation. And a great dread of the vast desert overwhelmed her soul.

Early in the morning she was called into her uncle's tent, where she found him with her aunt, and cousin, and Meshow, anxiously discussing the whole situation.

"Cecil, did you hear any sound the night that Middleton disappeared from the encampment?" Dick asked, hurriedly. "My aunt declares to us that you heard some strange noise."

"I fancied I heard a faint sound, as of scuffling, in the near distance, not far from my tent. But I could not be sure. I thought no more of it till now. Aunt Seraphina thought it might have been the movement of some restless camel."

"Look!" exclaimed her uncle, with emotion; "this was found, half-trampled in the sand, at a

short distance from encampment the next morning. A single link of it had caught Mustafa's eye."

He held forth to her a portion of a broken watch-chain, which they recognised as Middleton's.

"I fear lest there be danger," said Meshow.

"To whom?" exclaimed Miss Seraphina, hastily.

"Unto the Frank. It means death—or per-adventure slavery!"

"No—not killed!" said Mr. Cleveland hurriedly. "At worst, kept in captivity for a short time till we can ransom him."

"At best, taken away and sold as a slave to the Khalifa, or to the desert sheikhs," replied Meshow.

"Oh, no, they surely won't kill Middleton!" cried Dick. "They want money—they will keep him safe enough for ransom, and be sure to let us know."

"You know well enough how greedy the Arabs are!" exclaimed Miss Seraphina. "They will do anything for money!"

"A hopeless, cruel slavery will be in store for him, unless he is rescued soon," said Cecil anxiously.

"What is wanted is an Arab, travelling apparently on his own business, to search for him," said

Mr. Cleveland, thoughtfully. "If it were possible, an Englishman, who could speak Arabic fluently, disguised as an Arab, would be best. But Middleton himself was the only one who could have played the part to any purpose!"

"I must depart as soon as possible to seek him," said Meshow. "I but await the arrival of him whom I saw before. My messenger hath tarried. It may be too late, if he be not quickly ransomed with much gold."

"Tell his captors," Mr. Cleveland said, "that when they have delivered him to you, you will put gold in their hands, and give them a sure promise for the rest. I will provide you with a portion of the ransom ere you go."

"Payment by results, for Middleton's own sake," said Dick. "We must find him first, and promise to pay afterwards, on safe delivery."

A little later Meshow came in haste to Cecil, and told her he had heard fresh tidings, that had filled him with alarm for Middleton, and with fears for the safety of the women in the caravan.

"A strong party of the Wandering Bedouins," said Meshow, "are on their way to attack thy caravan. My uncles having quarrelled, the country will now abound with lawless robbers. The desert tribes will attack and rob each other's villages. I will



send thy party on at once, with my own foster-brother, Ghudda, who has come hither with me. His donar thou hast already visited as his father's guest. He will take thee to the Solitary Sheikh, of whom I spoke to thee before, to ask protection, and to send back for the caravan. This is the only way that I can help thee."

His dark, melancholy eyes spoke his devotion for her. Had Ceeil cared to see, his eyes spoke for Meshow the love that she had not divined, and that he might not tell.

He paused awhile in thought, then added gloomily:—

"I have discovered, further, verily it was the plot of Mahmoud Bey to capture the Frank. Yet spare his name—do not betray my uncle's name or rank, for Ahmed Bey hath been as an indulgent parent to me since my father hath departed unto Paradise. It would ill become a kinsman to bring ill-fame on one of his own house, and blood, and name—for it would be disgrace to us if it were known amongst the Arabs that our near kinsman, one of our house and line, hath in cold blood betrayed the guest who trusted him, and who ate of our salt, and hath partaken of our Arab hospitality. Mine utmost will I do to find and rescue him—but I impose on thee this sole condition: O, lady, that

thou wilt suppress to all my uncle's rank and name!"

"I promise," answered Cecil, earnestly.

"Thou art not safe in the caravan," Meshow presently resumed, after an instant's rapid thought, "and neither is the other woman safe. I have heard sure tidings of these Wandering Bedouins, who are coming in large numbers from the borders of the desert of the Great Sudan. Fain would I send thee safely with my foster-brother, Ghudda, to the Solitary Sheikh, before I go, to seek protection, and to save thy caravan from being plundered by their threatened raid. Take Ghudda with thee as thy guide and guard; for he is known of the Bedouins. Ask the Sheikh's protection, and he will afford it. But time presses, O lady—go at once! Meantime, I will seek the Frank who hath been forced away, and rescue him for thee."

"It seems very difficult," said Cecil.

"Do not lose thy courage, but hope for the best, and trust me," said Meshow. "I myself would guide thee and I would send Ghudda on that other quest," he added thoughtfully; "but it is difficult, perhaps impossible, for anyone save me. Therefore, as I have this other quest to follow, will Ghudda guide thee to the tents of the Great Solitary One. Fear not! For Ghudda knows I would not spare

him did aught befall thee. He will answer to me for thy precious safety even with his life. Whilst I lingered here I have sent word to a Bedouin to whom I am well known to find the Frank and meet me later at a well. Hark! the Arabs are returning with the camels that have been grazing on the desert scrub. They come—I go! Be thou on watch, and give me opportunity to speak with thee again. Meantime, be thou silent, O lady, and keep thou thine own counsel.”

That afternoon through the opening made by the wall of their tent being partly raised to admit the free draught of cool air, Cecil, who was vainly trying to read, raised her eyes and saw Meshow signalling to her at a little distance from the tent, and she quietly slipped out into the waste to meet him.

“Go forward to the palms,” said the young Arab, quietly; “there will I meet thee presently.”

In a few moments his slight and graceful figure was approaching her, and soon he reached her side. He turned to her at once, saying quickly:—

“Thy dromedaries are all good and fresh, and Ghudda will secure them. Take my counsel, and be gone without delay. I will give thee timely warning when I have arranged with Ghudda for thy start. Not a word, a warning, to thy kinsfolk till it be time

to start. If thou wouldst save them, still keep silence. Only call them to thee privily, at the last. Keep thy intention secret in thine heart, lest Arab spies suspect. Thy caravan will start this evening to journey further on towards the tents of Ahmed Bey. When I give thee this sign, do thou drop something that I may pick up for thee, and check thy dromedary, pause, and wait till I come up with thee. Then will I give thee warning when the moment of thy flight shall be. At the last moment, when thou startest, will I give thee my token for the Solitary Sheikh."

"You think this course of action is the best?"

"Thou wilt be safe at the douar of the Solitary One, whilst I seek the Frank."

"Ahmed Bey would help us."

"Ahmed Bey could not spare men to help thee in thy time of danger, his own serious quarrel with mine uncle being now in hand."

Meshow declared that not only were they in the greatest danger, but that all the place around was now unsafe for travellers; and unless they went in silence, he urged that spies might be about, sent on in front by the Bedouins, to act as scouts. He warned her to push on with as little delay as possible.

"Wouldst thou save thy party from the danger

arising out of this quarrel between the cousin sheikhs, push on at once. Also, the wandering Bedouins are now become a source of real danger even to the Arabs, for Ahmed Bey will be neither willing nor able to afford them help against these fierce alien desert tribes."

## CHAPTER XV.

Late that afternoon, the caravan being again en route, Meshow, who had been riding with apparent carelessness by the side of Ghudda's dromedary, gave the promised sign. As Ceeil rode along, she instantly responded. Idly dropping out of the straggling train of camels, she watched her opportunity to drop her book upon the sand. The attentive Meshow saw it fall, and moved his mare towards it; and, letting himself down suddenly, head foremost, picked it up with his hand, and then threw himself with slight effort back into his seat instantly. The whole thing was done like lightning. He passed on to Cecil, who had halted, and who now turned back to meet him. As he handed her the book, they had time for a few brief words together.

"It will be to-night," he uttered briefly; "and Ghudda will be ready with the camels. There will be four good camels near thy tent. Ghudda will see to it. Marshallah! They will be the swiftest ones he can procure. Thou wilt not get through unless thou goest at once. The Bedouins will soon be on the road, and they would stop thee as they

have stopped many others. Warn thy kinsman at the last, but do not tell the woman, lest she betray ye with her unruly tongue. Use thine own discretion with the Frankish youth."

"I will be discreet," said Cecil, softly. "As for my cousin, his love of adventure will easily be enlisted on the side of caution."

Both of them instantly dropped back again into their accustomed places in the caravan.

At their next brief halt Cecil noted that Ghudda, who had remounted his swift, highly-bred dromedary, after it had been watered and allowed to feed awhile, had started forward at a rapid pace.

"He has gone in the direction of his father's douar, to meet his kinsmen, who will bring him dromedaries," Cecil thought.

Ghudda disappeared from view behind a sand-hill. Cecil was right in her conjecture that his disappearance had something to do with what Meshow had said about the fresh, swift dromedaries.

At the evening halt she again saw Ghudda, busily engaged in grooming his own dromedary—a beautiful creature, with the slim limbs and finely-turned neck that mark the highest breed.

"Ghudda has gone to put the nose-ropes on the camels he has chosen for certain of the men," said Meshow, softly approaching her. "Go ye on before,

and leave the caravan to follow a little way behind. Ye may be obliged to leave the greater number of the Arabs behind, if ye should take to flight. Take with ye Selim and Mustafa, and old Ibrahim, if ye be forced to leave the caravan behind, prey to the Bedouins. They will be given the best camels. This may gain ye time, for the Bedouins would stop to plunder the caravan."

He had spoken rapidly, apparently quietly passing by without remark.

By-and-bye Cecil saw Ghudda in the dusk, waiting silently and patiently under the deep shadow of a palm-tree. Four camels stood unsaddled near him, where they had been tethered. And Cecil understood.

She fixed her eyes on the distant fire of the Arabs, which was beginning to die down slowly, as the night grew deeper. And there came to her a low murmur of men's voices, deep and hollow as a murmur of the wind.

That night she seized an opportunity for having a few private words apart with Mr. Cleveland, and he then prepared Miss Seraphina with great caution for their start by night. Ghudda had already arranged the matter with the chosen Arabs.

The signal Meshow had agreed on being given, they passed quietly one by one from their tents into



the darkness, leaving the majority of the men to quietly pack, and rearrange the caravan. And they came, meantime, to the spot behind a sandhill, that Meshow had agreed upon with Ceeil.

"Thou mayest trust this man, O lady," said Meshow, introducing Ghudda. "My foster-brother will be true to ye, at peril of his life. Ghudda rides before ye save in time of danger. Then wilt thou find him ready at thy side. We have here four swift dromedaries waiting for ye."

"These dromedaries are the swiftest I could procure, O my brother," said Ghudda. "The women can travel swiftly with these stirrups, made of rope."

"Can you not come with us yourself?" asked Mr. Cleveland, of Meshow.

"Nay; now must I depart at once to seek the Frank, for whom I fear the worst. I have but tarried here till I could send my messenger to one I know amongst the Wandering Bedouins, to bid him find the Frank for me."

Meshow now offered Ceeil a curious ring of gold, engraved with Arabic characters, that he had shown her once before.

"This is my token for the Solitary Sheikh," he said. "Look, O lady, that ye lose it not, but keep it safely. I once did the Solitary One some signal service in the desert, and he gave me then this token,

and bade me claim return. 'When thou, or thy messenger,' he said, 'shalt show me this again, ask what thou wilt of me, and thy desire shall be granted thee.' Depart at once. Haste! O ye Franks. Leave the caravan a little way behind to follow ye—thou wilt be fairly safe with Ghudda, who is known of the Bedouins. But here thou mayest be killed, or captured. Delay no longer, therefore, but go now."

In the silence of the start, the dromedaries kneeling, their gracefully poised heads turning to right and left in the dim light, Meshow came close to Cecil to help her mount.

Then Cecil tried to speak, to utter her warm thanks.

"Thou hast trusted me, O lady—it is enough—I will not fail thee," Meshow answered gravely. "In the desert, wherever I may be, remember I am at thy service."

"It were well," said Ghudda softly, "that we start. As Allah wills it, the night is dark; and it will not be moon for some hours yet."

When they were all seated on their saddles, the dromedaries rose. They rode cautiously at first, but when the moon rose to the full they increased their pace, going as fast as they could without fear of leaving the rest of the caravan too far behind.

Meshow went part of the way with them, but, being met by his messenger, he fell behind with him, with a brief word of parting, and was soon lost sight of in the night. By-and-bye they halted; the rest of the caravan came up with them; they rested for a little while, and then went on.

At daybreak they were riding in the middle of some low hills, and, as Ceeil's dromedary reached the summit, and stood on one of these, a flying figure came out from behind the distant slopes and went along the desert at a few hundred yards' distance—an Arab riding a fleet dromedary. For about half a mile the way lay in sight, and over that short space the dromedary passed at an incredibly swift pace. It more than equalled that of the swiftest racehorse. He was evidently put to his best speed. Suddenly, in the grey morning light, this single figure had dashed out from behind a sand-hill into sight, and in a few seconds it was gone again, disappearing round a swell of the waste. And Ceeil knew Meshow was passing—departing on his quest in search of Middleton. The solitude of the desert then seemed even greater to her than before.

That day it was considerably after sundown, and very dark, and they had not arrived yet at their camping-place. There was a strong, heaving wind, and they had considerable difficulty in keeping their

cloaks around them. It was so dark that, unless they kept close, they could not see each other's faces. Though their men were near, they could not hear their voices when they called. The sand was blown on the wind, and sudden, total darkness fell, the sand covering them in like a black pall. They now heard faint sounds of the calling voices of the Arabs borne on the fitful gusts of wind, and they strove in vain to come up with their companions, for they had evidently strayed from the track.

The fitful, calling voices had grown fainter, till at last they died away, and the distressed little party halted in despair. After trying vainly to retrace their steps, they gave up the attempt, until the violence of the storm should lessen.

At last the storm was over, and they threw back the hoods which had been drawn over their heads.

Cecil was now aware that they had lost their companions, and that she and Dick were alone with Ghudda on the waste, amongst the sandhills. The moon was struggling through the remaining rifts of clouds.

"We must hurry on alone with Ghudda now," said Cecil in dismay. "There is no help for it. If we arrive safely at our destination we will send back for the others as soon as possible, from the douar of the Solitary Sheikh."

“Let us look for the caravan,” Dick urged hurriedly. “My heart misgives me, Cecil, for your sake. Let us search for the caravan while yet we may. We are safe there—but alone on the waste we may be attacked and killed—or captured—which would be worse. Besides, we don’t know Ghudda.”

He shuddered involuntarily as he thought of Cecil’s possible fate if the wild Bedouins should come.

“Let us return to the caravan whilst there’s time!” he urged again.

“Meshow promised me that Ghudda would protect us even with his life,” said Cecil. “I have faith in him. And we go to save my aunt and uncle, and the caravan. For their sake and our own, we must press onward now!”

“What will happen to us, should this Ghudda betray Meshow’s trust?”

“Not for a moment could I mistrust him,” answered Cecil. “Whatever happens, and whatever he may be, Meshow has ideas of hospitality—the greatest virtue Arabs possess. This, as well as Ghudda’s pledged faith to his foster-brother and his chief, will be the greatest possible safeguard we could have upon the desert. And it would render impossible any treachery to us on Ghudda’s part. Besides, we have been the guests of his own douar. I feel that

there are chivalry and honour in the man."

Ghudda had now guided his dromedary close to them.

"Dost fear, O woman?" asked Ghudda, harshly.

His full, red lips curled in momentary, half-stern, half-pitying contempt. Cecil little knew how much depended on her courage then, and, for the moment, on her strength of mind and power of nerve.

"Nay, we fear not!" she answered proudly, in her best Arabic. And her voice rang clearly out.

"Marshallah! Good!"

Ghudda uttered something further in a guttural undertone. His wild, dark eyes were flashing with approval. The savage element in this strange youth was fairly roused. Then he turned silently, and they went on again.

Mile after mile they sped onwards, the cousins clinging to the pommels of their saddles.

When the moon was setting they dismounted for a rest, and Ghudda tethered the dromedaries, that they might not stray. At dawn they had a hurried breakfast from some stores he had, and then went on again.

"This morning we come to a well—very little rest—then forward!" Ghudda said.

The way lay over an immense plain, flat and stony. Not a living being besides themselves was

moving on all the surface of this plain, which before and behind seemed to stretch away into boundless space.

“Oh, this endless, pathless, stony desert!” murmured Dick, disheartened.

“‘Sweet are the uses of adversity, which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in its head.’ As witnessed by this Ghudda’s true devotion to us.” he commented finally, to Cecil, striving to speak in his usual bright fashion.

He began to whistle softly, to keep his spirits up, though he still glanced anxiously at the grave countenance of the weary girl who rode so patiently beside him.

Now and then a stray Bedouin of the desert met and eyed them, staring hard at the veiled woman on her dromedary, for Cecil closely veiled herself at their approach. But Ghudda invariably made a sign they seemed to recognise, accept, and understand, and they were not molested.

By-and-bye they approached a halting caravan beside a well. Ghudda stopped, and saluted the Arabs here.

“Salaama! Peace be with thee!”

They replied with a civil Arab salutation. They then courteously inquired of each other their respective businesses and route.

“I seek the Solitary Sheikh,” said Ghudda.

At his name the men respectfully made way for him, inviting him to rest beside the well. All three dismounted, and Cecil sat, still carefully veiled, apart with Dick.

“Say, O my brother, wilt guide us to the Solitary Sheikh, if thou knowest his whereabouts?” asked Ghudda of an Arab, “if he be now absent from his douar.”

“I will do so, O my brother. I am ready to go with thee when thou wilt. But we think he is now at his own douar.”

“Nevertheless, wilt journey with us for a little space? I am acquainted with the way; but it would be well that we should travel with a stronger party.”

The Arabs, assenting, went with them a little distance on their way. About noon next day they were met by a new escort, going the same way, and they said good-bye to the old one. Afterwards, their ways parted, and they separated.

Later on they halted for necessary rest beside some thorn trees.

“See these men on camels coming out from the sand hills!” Dick exclaimed.

They saw a long string of armed Arabs in peaked caps. A grey hue came suddenly on Ghudda’s full



red lips, and he glanced uneasily at Cecil. She saw the look, and, understanding it, she and her cousin entwined their arms and clung together for an instant. Then they all three hastily remounted.

The straggling company of fierce-looking Arabs were riding towards them, pointing spears at them. They spoke a few brief words amongst themselves, and then asked the travellers where they were going.

Cecil felt uneasy as the swarthy, keen-eyed Arabs crowded near. All had a daring and hard look; the faces of the strangers were fierce and wild, and most forbidding in expression as they boldly eyed the woman.

“Whence comest thou?”

“From the tents of Ahmed Bey. Where art thou from, O strangers?” asked Ghudda in return.

“From a journey in the desert to another tribe, to fetch this horse of noble breed.”

“Of what tribe art thou?”

“We are Bedouins—but we own the Solitary Sheikh as Chief of all.”

“What is thy business?”

“We are taking this horse to the Solitary Sheikh for his own use. We have come from afar, bringing this gift.”

“Is there peace upon the desert?”

“There has lately been some quarrel between two sheikhs, but it is over.”

“We, too, seek the Great Solitary One, to whom we carry tidings,” Ghudda said. “Marshallah! Thou knowest well the power of the most noble Solitary Sheikh, and in his name we crave permission to depart in peace upon our journey.”

The Sheikh's name instantly arrested their attention.

“Y'Allah! We also are on our way to speak with him, and we will accompany thee thither.”

They looked closely at the Frank youth, and the veiled Frank woman on their dromedaries, but did not molest them. The calmness with which Cecil had faced the menace of real danger had won the admiration of these dusky savages. They stood aside out of the way to let them pass, and all fell into place in a long file behind.

By-and-bye there was a sudden change in scenery. Instead of the sterile solitudes of the great desert, they came upon fertile tracts, where bleating goats and sheep were pasturing, and some gay brown Arab children were sporting on fresh, green grass. On arrival at the douar they were taken to the presence of the Solitary Sheikh, in his own house.

The Sheikh was sitting on a rare and beautiful old praying-carpet. His clothing was all white, and he wore a white turban on his brow, over which the soft folds of his silk haik fell gracefully. He had apparently not seen or heard their entrance. For a few moments he remained absorbed in reverie, and did not move his eyes from the ancient vellum manuscript he held.

He raised his eyes at last, as they stood silently before him. Then their guide addressed him with exceeding reverence.

“Sidi, may the grace of Allah be with thee! I bring to thy presence strangers who would speak with thee. Deign, O favoured of Allah, to hearken unto them!”

Then Ghudda said:—

“O Sidi, Solitary One, may the grace of Allah rest upon thee—and Allah’s smile! That the light of thy countenance may shine upon me when I make petition.”

As he paused, the Solitary Sheikh briefly signed him to proceed.

“I ask protection, O Great Solitary One,” said Ghudda, “for this woman, who hath a certain token for thy acceptance.”

Here he made a sign, and Cecil, in response, pre-

sented the Sheikh at once with Meshow's token. He received it gravely as he heard the message.

"Thou art welcome, O strangers," said the Sheikh. "I have heard of thee already—all that thou requirest ask for, and it shall be given thee—all that I have is thine."

Then again he drooped his head above his manuscript, and he heard Ghudda further with downcast eyes.

"I also seek protection, O Great Solitary One," said Ghudda, "for the kinsfolk of this woman, who are lost on the waste, and who else may be a prey to the Bedouins, and I ask protection for their caravan, which is in danger of a lawless raid from the Bedouins of the desert, and which is halted a day's journey from this place. Wherefore, I journeyed hither, bringing this woman, with the token from my chief Meshow, who was in favour with thee. And, further, this woman asks thine aid to find a Frank of their own party, who hath been captured lately--stolen thence—to deliver him from threatened slavery amongst the Arabs of the desert."

"What is the Frank's name, O stranger?"

"His name is Middleton, O Sidi, in his own country."

"Marshallah!"

The grave Arab started violently, suddenly lifted up his head, raised his eyes to Cecil's face, and looked full at her. The large grey eyes in the Sheikh's dark face met the astonished girl's.

But he as suddenly controlled himself. Shock, or surprise—whatever it might be—his eyes drooped as before; yet a certain nervous twitching in the brown, slender fingers that held the manuscript betrayed to her his feelings of a strange, strong interest.

“He shall be sought at once! The caravan shall be sent for. I accord this woman and this youth here my protection.”

The Sheikh then gave his orders to some attendants in Arabic.

“Have they captured the Englishman for ransom, or for slavery—or perchance for torture and revenge?”

“Nay, Sidi, not for ransom, else demand for ransom had been made ere now,” said Ghudda.

Then they were taken away, and all three eared for, and accommodated in some other tents apart.

Meantime, the Solitary Sheikh passed on alone amongst the solitudes of the unconfined and pathless desert, to the silence that he loved in the great wilderness beyond. These solitudes and

deep unbroken silence were his chief solace in moments of untold keen suffering that sometimes came to him. At such times the presence of any living being would have been a torment and a source of even greater pain to him.

## CHAPTER XVI.

Meantime, when the storm had cleared, at the caravan they had missed Cecil and her cousin.

“Inshallah—ya Sitt!” the alarmed Mustafa cried. “And the young master—both of them have vanished from the caravan. And Ghudda is gone too. Abbaseh saw him last.”

“The young master and the Sitt must be with him. And the Bedouins may capture the woman in the desert,” Selim said.

“Mafeesch!” exclaimed Ibrahim; “the woman will not come to any hurt—she will be placed in the harem of a Sheikh!”

“You have the Eastern way of looking at these matters!” exclaimed Mr. Cleveland, in despair. “This is Job’s comfort, truly—and verily art thou Job’s Comforter!” he added bitterly, with fresh perturbation. “I lose all I value most in life if I lose my only son, and my dear niece!”

Miss Seraphina’s knowledge of Arabic was but scanty, and she did not possess much knowledge of the Arab character; but her wits were sharpened by anxiety, and she had somehow caught the drift of Ibrahim’s words.

“What did he say?” she exclaimed distractingly. “I cannot quite follow him.”

Her brother hurriedly explained to her.

“I would far rather that my niece was killed!” exclaimed Miss Seraphina, breaking down and weeping bitterly.

The Arabs pitched the tents, and they disconsolately camped there for the night.

As the first, cold, grey glimmering of Eastern dawn appeared in the sky, their own grieved and haggard faces shocked each other's sight. All, from Ibrahim and Mustafa downwards, were despairing, and most of the men sat gloomily down, dispirited and sad.

“As usual with Orientals,” said Mr. Cleveland angrily to his half-sister. “Easily disheartened by mischance.”

The Arabs already looked on the matter as hopeless, and went about their preparations for departing for the search quite listlessly, and without heart. Mr. Cleveland's anxious eyes turned from one gloomy face to another in dismay. Even Ibrahim appeared sullen.

In his halting Arabic he spoke to them.

“Help me now, and I will pay you well.”

Not an Arab stirred at his appeal. They all looked on him with sullen, gloomy faces.



Mr. Cleveland hurriedly sought his half-sister, whom he found sitting disconsolately on an Eastern carpet in a corner of the tent she had so lately shared with Cecil.

"Even the careless and light-hearted Selim is gloomy and silent now, and only shakes his head sullenly if I ask him to work," complained the helpless Mr. Cleveland, bitterly. "Oh! how greatly I wish Middleton were here."

"Brother! We must find our poor, dear Dick and Cecil—only think of it! Lost somewhere on this limitless waste of unfeeling and insensate sand and stone. Only countless miles and miles of dreary desert. And you are so slow!"

She shuddered, and fresh tears came to her relief.

"Good heavens, Seraphina! Do not make my tribulation greater than it is. I am quite as anxious to find my son and niece as you can be!" Mr. Cleveland interposed impatiently. "Why accuse me, then, of being slow in preparation for our search? We have no clue on this roadless waste, and I know not where to go!"

Miss Seraphina sat up instantly, and wrung her hands at him.

"It is like leaning on a broken reed, to lean on you! What is life, after all?" she moaned; and

then resumed her hopeless sobbing, and her rocking to and fro, almost driving Mr. Cleveland mad.

After some deep cogitation he ordered the tents to be struck, and preparations for departure to be made instantly. Something in his tone caused the Arabs to rise now with alacrity, and to obey.

The caravan was nearly ready to start when Mustafa, with a grave countenance, entered the tent.

The Arabs are all sitting round the fire drinking coffee, O my master. They are not making preparations for the journey."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Cleveland, hastily. "Are they not loading the camels?"

"O master, when I sought Ibrahim. he saith he and his men will not desert the Sitt. The men refuse the journey—they refuse to travel further till the young Sitt be found. The old Sitt still weepeth loudly for her in her tent."

"Fools! We go to find her! Tell the Arabs we go on our way to seek the Sitt and the young master even now! We go back to the tents of Ahmed Bey to ask his help and counsel, as we had purposed doing for Mr. Middleton."

"Inshallah! I know nothing of the matter. Master had better tell the Arabs so himself."

On going out again, Mr. Cleveland found, instead of the usual bustle before starting, that a

dead silence reigned. All the Arabs were sitting by their couchant camels in a group. Not a man moved at his approach. But he harangued them again in a brief, curt speech in his bad Arabic, and ere long there was the usual stir and bustle of departure; the quickened movement was renewed around them, and enterprise was again in front.

"I told them it was not sullenness, nor curses and abuse that we required, but the tents struck and the camels loaded," Mr. Cleveland explained to Miss Seraphina. "Appeal to his feelings by the usual complimentary epithets of pig and dog, and the Arab will give in to any extent!"

"Where is Ali?" Mr. Cleveland asked, as they prepared to start.

They all now missed his presence from the caravan, and wondered. Till one of the Arabs remembered that early in the morning he had seen Ali go to tend and feed three camels, and he had tethered them apart from the rest and near to his own tent. Since when he had not been seen. And the camels, too, were gone.

"Mafeesch! The treacherous one! He hath gone upon some private business of his own," said Ibrahim.

And Mustafa called down maledictions on the absent Ali's head; desiring that Allah would send

great troubles upon his relatives—entreating evil to the aged grandmother of Ali, and to all his defunct family.

“May his great grandfather and great grandmother receive the curse of Allah,” said Mustafa. “Where hath he taken them?”

“Perhaps he has gone alone to seek the lost ones,” suggested Mr. Cleveland, thoughtfully.

All that day they journeyed, with but a brief interval for rest. In the evening a long stretch of pale light from East to West on the horizon showed up a dark mass in their front, which Ibrahim told them was their destination for the night. Frequent flashes of lightning indicated that there was a thunderstorm at hand in the distance. The ground was rough and broken, and hidden in the general gloom. They arrived at a poor Arab douar just as the storm began.

Next day they passed a small caravan loitering beside a well, and asked if an English boy and woman, and an Arab, mounted on dromedaries, had passed that way. The leaders of the caravan replied that they had seen them pass some time before, and had spoken to the Arab when they had stopped, for a short rest, to water their dromedaries and to fill their water-skins.

“By this time they must be far upon their way.

for they departed very swiftly on fleet dromedaries."

"In what direction did they go?"

"They went towards the East."

Mr. Cleveland's party left the well and journeyed on in silence, and with heavy hearts. After some weary hours had passed, the old sheikh, Ibrahim, who was in front as usual, hurried back toward them, and sharp word was sent to the rear. In a few moments five or six Arabs ran up from behind, and after a few words with him they all pressed forward. There was great excitement, and much low and earnest talking amongst the rest of the party.

"What is it all about?" asked Mr. Cleveland, anxiously.

"Nukb—Amusba," said the old chief briefly, pointing forward.

Mr. Cleveland and Miss Seraphina strained their unaccustomed eyes in vain. They only saw the wide waste, still and silent in the morning sun.

"Nukb—Amusba—people coming," Ibrahim repeated impatiently.

By degrees they made out figures which the old sheikh, with his keen Arab eyes, had soon detected in the distance.

"Bedouins," said Ibrahim, in Arabic. "War-

like and fierce, and well armed—devils to ride—despoil and plunder travellers.”

There was great perturbation amongst the Arabs of his party.

“Merciful Allah! We shall not get through,” they said.

“The Bedouins will plunder our caravan as they have plundered others!”

The Wandering Bedouins rapidly approached.

“I am Ibrahim, and belong to a tribe in the Sahara,” shouted the old chief. “Who are ye?”

“We are Wandering Bedouins—our tents at present are towards Sudan.”

“Whence come ye?”

“From a raid in the desert—we are going back to our tents. Where art thou coming from? What is thy business?”

“Marshallah! We are travelling in peace over the desert—let us pass in peace.”

An Arab was now seen galloping up to them. As he came near they recognised him as the sheikh Douhi, who had proposed to wed Miss Seraphina. At a sign from their leader the Bedouins fell suddenly upon the party, and made them prisoners. Miss Seraphina, in resistance, was mishandled, to her great alarm.

“The old man will make good slave,” said a

Bedouin; "he is still strong and able-bodied, though no longer young. The woman is not young or handsome for the harem, but she can work."

So absorbed were the Bedouins in contemplation of their prisoners and their spoil that they did not notice some approaching camels and horsemen coming towards them at great speed from behind the sand-hills. The camels now swept superciliously up.

This party was the one sent by the Solitary Sheikh, with his own black slave to seek them and be their escort and passport and safe-conduct through the desert to his douar. The Bedouins resisted, elinging to their prey, and poor Miss Seraphina, much mishandled, screamed aloud.

Then the white-robed figure of an Arab sheikh appeared like magic, riding a white horse—and with uplifted hand he stopped their way.

"In the name of Allah! The All-wise, the All-powerful, the All-merciful! Release this woman!"

The rest of the camel-men came up with them. The Solitary Sheikh, with a few curt, greatly-accented words in Arabic, dismissed the Bedouins, who, with crest-fallen looks, now owned his sway, and sent the English party forward to his village, under the guidance of his special trusty slave and a few Arabs as their escort. And the dispersed Be-

douins, disappointed of their booty, galloped off in clouds of dust, their diabolic horsemanship and magnificent steeds exciting the admiration of their late prisoners.



## CHAPTER XVII.

A little time had passed since Meshow had departed in search of Middleton, when, in the light of the setting sun, appeared far away upon the desert wastes one solitary Arab riding a very weary dromedary. On that vast plain, from the horizon of which Meshow emerged, no other object was in sight. He alighted at a well, watered his dromedary, washed his hands and face, said his prayers, then seated himself on the short green sward and prepared to eat, while behind him grazed his dromedary. He appeared to be expecting to meet someone here, for his eyes kept wandering from left to right, and he frequently gazed long into the distance.

A growing speck on the horizon proved to be another Arab, riding a dromedary and leading a mare; a tall, swarthy Bedouin. He wore a long beard, and his face was much tanned by the sun. This traveller rode also to the well, saluted Meshow, tethered his horse and dromedary where they could graze, looked his horse well over, and took his supper from his saddle. Meshow observed him closely as they sat beside each other on the turf.

“Art thou he whom Abbaseh hath sent to meet me? I sent word before I started on my journey hither for Mohammed Beshara to meet me at this well. Is it thou, O brother of kindness? I once fell in with thee in other days,” he said.

“Yea. In other days was I acquainted with thee, and Abbasseh sent me hither,” answered the Bedouin. “Where art thou travelling?”

“Merciful Allah! I travel not for pleasure. I seek a Frank, O Beshara, one of that tribe of the Franks that is called the English, who hath been seized by Wandering Bedouins of thy tribe.”

“I fell in lately with the son of the sheikh of the Bedouins, with whom he was at first,” responded his companion. “He belongeth to another douar. I have been absent from my douar upon a journey—and am now on my way back to my own tents. I met him as I tell thee, and he gave me greeting as I came up with him, and told me of the Frank. He also said that he had met with men from the Sudan, to bargain with them for his father concerning the delivery of the Frank into their hands, to be taken to Timbuctoo. They may go upon their way to-morrow evening to their own tents, and he with them. Peradventure they are already far upon their way.”

“It is the Frank!” exclaimed Meshow. Blest are thy tidings. Praise to Allah! Of a surety it is he whom I seek.”

“Afterwards I met with these Bedouins on my journey hither, and they passed me with the Frank tied on the saddle on a white camel’s back.”

“Where do they belong?” inquired Meshow.

“They belong to the desert near Timbuctoo. A man born at Timbuctoo took him away by night, and bore him away into the darkness of the dunes towards the South, and the tents of his own people. He is now a desert man. I know his tribe; but before he settled there he was a nomad, one of the perpetual wanderers of the desert, who dwell in tents. On the journey thither, on every side upon the way, there are immense white dunes of sand, like mountains, and the ground is often white with the saltpetre. The Frank will presently be taken into the Wilderness, to the uttermost parts of the Southern desert.”

“Where is he now, O Beshara?”

“He is with a Bedouin tribe. They belong to a donar on the very borders of the Sudan desert. But they will keep him captive for a little while at another douar, if they go not to-night—a night and a day’s march from here. He will soon be in captivity in a brown earth house in the Sahara.”

“As thy knowledge goeth, have they captured him for slavery, for ransom, or perchance for vengeance?”

“Nay, O my brother, not for ransom. That hath been forbidden. One had come to them, and said: ‘This man hath robbed me of a woman’s love—and therefore do I seek revenge on him. Take him away with thee to sell him at Timbuctoo for a slave. Keep thou the gold he brings, and for this service to me I will pay thee well beside. And may this thy service be accounted to thee for righteousness.’”

“How camest thou to meet this man born at Timbuctoo?”

“I was travelling in the Sahara desert on the great caravan route which endeth at Timbuctoo, and I was resting by a well where I had spent the night, when the snarl of camels on the road I had come told me that a caravan was coming up and passing towards the South. When they got to the well, they watered the camels there, and I had word with the sheikh, and afterwards with the man born at Timbuctoo. All this did I learn for thee when I received thy message. Thereupon I went back again unto the sheikh, whom I found by the well, still resting by the way.”

“At one time thou saidst that thou desired to

repay my ancient service to thy daughter," said Meshow.

"Verily thou didst me signal service," answered the Bedouin, "and I have not forgotten."

"Then let the stranger pay a ransom and return to his own people," said Meshow.

"He is but an Infidel—dog of a Christian—then let him remain to toil in the Sudan, and be slave to Moslem masters—those of the true faith!"

Beshara spoke with something of the fire of fanaticism kindling in his brooding eyes.

"Nay, let him pay a ransom and go free. What matters his religion to the faithful, if he leave the country. Merciful Allah! Hath he yet been maimed or tortured by the Bedouins?" added Meshow, quickly.

For a moment there was almost a fanatical expression in Beshara's face.

"Nay—that would destroy his market value. Then would he be unfit for slavery. Not a hair of the Frank's head hath yet been hurt."

"I did thee service once, O my brother. Wilt thou hearken to my words?"

An eager look came into the man's face.

"Marshallah! I have travelled not for pastime—I have travelled hither on thy business."

“Very kind hast thou been to me in this time of trouble,” said Meshow.

“Allah is just. I hearken. Thou knowest well I am not one to show ingratitude. Thou didst save my little daughter when she had been seized by hostile Arabs in their raid upon my douar. I vowed then I would repay thee for the service, should destiny afford me fitting opportunity. I go not back upon my spoken word.”

Meshow saw that the face of his companion was altered; as though he were struggling with conflicting feelings. Mingled gratitude and fanaticism smouldered in his eyes.

“Now can’st thou keep thy pledge,” urged Meshow, in reply. “And I will teach thee how. Therefore, do thou go to the douar of the Bedouins and say to them:—‘Take the captive Frank not to Timbuctoo—for there are those who claim him. Deliver him to me—thou shalt be rich. He hath greatness in his own land. In his own country is he great. There he hath abundance and to spare of gifts and wealth, and his riches fail not—they are very great!’”

“I have no money, O Meshow. If they will not consent?”

Meshow looked eagerly away towards the

South. In all his movements there was now a flame-like intensity.

“Then privily agree with one of them, for a reward, to deliver him into my hands by night, outside the douar where he is kept prisoner. Offer him some portion of the ransom, and give him present promise for the rest. Lo, here is gold.”

Beshara's fingers closed reluctantly upon the money; but still his face was full of thought.

“If they suspect I took the Frank away from them by stealth, then, how may I appease their wrath when it shall be known afterwards he hath escaped?”

“Nay, then, say naught of it to any of the tribe. It is unwise to incense the powerful if thy sympathy lies with the helpless. I will remain a little way behind thee on the desert—when thou hast left me behind a little time, I will follow slowly in thy track unto the douar on the borders of the Sudan desert. And thou wilt aid me privily afterwards. Thy compact with me must be made before we leave this well.”

“Yea. I will put him in thy hands if thou wilt come with me. Freedom for freedom—liberty for liberty. I will free for thee the Frank, even as thou didst deliver my little one for me. Tarry behind

me a little space, as thou hast said, and then come after me.”

“My dromedary is almost spent. See! he lieth now with his long neck upon the ground—which, as thou knowest, is the last symptom of fatigue. Even after rest, he could not keep up with thy dromedary.”

“Take my dromedary, and I will ride the mare. Take my camel in exchange for thine, and leave the other here, and I will send for him. He will recover in a little while. He hath food and water here. A few hours’ rest will restore to him his former vigour. The camel that I offer thee is strong and swift. There is scarce one that can keep up with him when he goes at his best. But we must haste! To go there one must take the route that the Bedouins call the shortest route to Timbuctoo. Hopeless slavery will be in store for the Frank if he be not rescued soon.”

“May Allah reward thee! Very kind hast thou been to me in this time of trouble. I will keep faith with thee. See that thou keepest faith with me,” replied Meshow.

They rested for a portion of the night. Then the Bedouin seized the camel’s nose-ring, and ordered him to kneel, that Meshow might mount. Beshara sprang upon his horse and rode away, and



Meshow commanded the camel on which he was seated to rise, and, pulling at his nose-rope, made him follow the mare. The tired camel was left behind to recover at the well.

They had only halted a short time beside the well. When the moon rose they had mounted their animals, and now pushed on their way over the great, empty, dun-coloured plain. When the moon set, they halted for a brief rest. At earliest dawn they went on again. Then Meshow thanked Beshara very heartily for his promised help, and prepared to fall behind, for they were nearly there. The Bedouin said no more; so, with the usual courteous Arab salutations, they separated, and Beshara proceeded to pass on ahead. Meshow, after waiting patiently until Beshara had become a mere speck in the distance, followed the tracks of the mare. At last Meshow rode slowly down a low hill, and saw in the sandy hollow at his feet a village—a collection of mud houses and tents.

Meshow took great precaution not to arrive too near the Bedouin douar till it was getting dark, and before moonrise.

Meantime, Beshara had arrived within the douar, and next day he spoke apart with the Bedouin who had charge of Middleton.

“Thou wilt give me gold?” asked the Bedouin greedily, “if I aid thee privily by night?”

“When thou hast delivered him to me I will put gold in thy hands. Thou knowest me—and thou hast my sure promise for the rest. I will pay thee all thou askest.”

“I will assist thee, then,” the Bedouin said with sparkling eyes. “May Allah increase thy wealth!”

That evening, as Middleton sat in the doorway of his hut, two Arabs passed him slowly, shrouded in their burnouses, with the hoods drawn up over their heads. Only their black beards were visible. These were Beshara and his accomplice. As the sun began to set the Arabs began to pray. They cast themselves upon the earth, and poured forth their cries to God. Thus it came about that Middleton observed a strange Bedouin, who had been earnestly engaged in his devotions a little apart from his companions, his prayer-carpet spread. When he rose up, Beshara passed near Middleton, as though by accident, and spoke to him.

“I come in Meshow’s name. O stranger, to warn and rescue thee. The Bedouin who has promised help is friendly for the moment—but one cannot trust him. Meshow once saved my daughter from ruthless Bedouin hands. In return for this, I will do

all I can for thee. It will need care, and must be done by night, lest there be spies about. I will give thee warning. Do not show haste else. But watch thine opportunity to give me chance to speak with thee again. We must part now, lest we be watched by spies."

"All is now arranged," Beshara said to Meshow, whom he met later on at the appointed place outside the douar, when it was dusk. His dark eyes glanced about him as he spoke, with ceaseless vigilance. "In the tents the men are all asleep—even the watchman sleeps. I have waited long till they should sleep, and now in another hour they will be called to evening prayer. I have fastened two camels together. They are close by, outside the douar, beside the single palm-tree. Once mounted, with a start, none can overtake thee. The water-skins are filled, and dates and doora are abundantly provided for the journey. I have already warned the Frank that thou art waiting for him. He who hath agreed to help me hath got rid of the Bedouin whose turn it was to-night to guard the prisoner."

"What is the hour? When shall we start?"

"Before the call to midnight prayer, O my brother! Thou wilt be unable to leave here before the moon goes down, about midnight. Then he will

come to thee. Be ready for the start when darkness comes."

"Thou hast done well. May Allah reward thee!"

So, wrapping himself up in his aba, Meshow lay down to wait. By the single palm-tree Meshow's dromedaries waited.

The friendly Bedouin had contrived that Middleton should lie that night unguarded in an empty stable at the douar.

"I have bound him with a camel-halter. Yet will I also guard him, O Hassan," he said to the Bedouin whom he was replacing.

"His bonds are guard enough," said Hassan in reply. "Waste not thy time for sleep on him."

He laughed aloud at his own jest, and gladly went away.

At last the waning moon went down. There was no movement of human life about the douar, and the Bedouin cautiously approached the prisoner on his hands and knees, and shook him gently, whispering in his ear as he lay close beside him in the darkness; and, still lying by him, cut his bonds and freed him.

Then Middleton and Beshara crept forth quietly, and, creeping cautiously from tree to tree, from hedge to hedge, until the village and the sleep-

ing Arabs were all safely passed, at last they reached the spot outside the douar where Meshow awaited them with the two dromedaries.

Meshow and Middleton immediately mounted, bade Beshara, his Bedouin guide and rescuer, farewell, and then travelled slowly forward in the dark. When they had gone some distance, Meshow stopped his dromedary, and dismounted for a moment.

“Merciful Allah! They have arisen at the douar,” he said. “Hearken, for it is the hour of prayer.”

A plaintive note swelled out until it seemed to echo over the rolling plain:—

“Allah Sidi! Allah Sidi! Allah Ali!”

The air resounded with the cries of the Arabs.

Meshow waited quietly until they died away again into unbroken silence.

His fears of pursuit aroused, in his anxiety Middleton thought he heard the gallop of horses’ feet borne faintly on the wind.

“I will place mine ear upon the ground and hearken,” Meshow said briefly to Middleton.

“There is no sound of pursuit?” asked Middleton, anxiously.

“Praise to Allah, all is silent at the douar,” responded Meshow, rising, and remounting.

All night they travelled under moon and stars,

and also in the dark. Then the Eastern sky was already changing colour. They looked toward the East, where a light, mysterious and delicate, proclaimed the coming dawn.

“It will be day soon. Look!” exclaimed Middleton.

As daylight came, they pressed on faster. The sun was not above the horizon line of the desert, but the darkness of night was passing. The air felt almost cold. Middleton was much affected by the mystery of that still hour.

When dawn appeared they were well on their way, and an hour or two after sunrise, almost all danger of pursuit was left behind.

They dismounted for a rest and a hasty meal, and Meshow spread mats under a solitary palm-tree on a flat without grass or any other trees. Beyond, the ground was covered thickly with tamarisk bushes.

Middleton gladly threw himself upon his Arab rug, and Meshow placed chopped tibbin before the dromedaries. They had a slight repast themselves, and then again pursued their way past the plains of saltpetre, until the noonday halt. The blue sky was clear, and the light of the sun intense. At length the sun sank again and darkness came.

When the moon was down, about three hours

before dawn, they halted by a well, and slept till nearly dawn. This was the old well where Meshow had met Beshara; and they found here the sick dromedary, now recovered by his rest. They gave their dromedaries drink, and filled their water-skins, and Middleton drank the coffee that Meshow had made for him.

They went on at dawn, and rode awhile. The sky turned hot and grey, the dawn broke, and then, with the startling suddenness of the desert, the sun rose, and they pushed forward. They camped for a brief rest, had breakfast, and then pressed on again, a light breeze stirring Middleton's hair and Meshow's Arab robes.

When they stopped in the evening, Meshow spread on the ground their sleeping mats and blankets, and recommended sleep, as they were to stay here until the moon rose to light them on their way. He quietly stretched himself full length and slept. But Middleton was nervous and excited, and he could not sleep. At last the moon rose, and they resumed their journey, much to Middleton's relief.

By-and-bye, having made sure they were beyond all possibility of danger of pursuit, they resolved to husband their dromedaries' strength. They had a longer halt that day. The dromedaries were recovered now from the effects of their long, quick

march, and their pursuers, if they were indeed behind, could not now overtake them.

“We travel no further to-day,” remarked Meshow, when they had ridden in silence for some little time; “for it is near the hour of evening prayer. Behold the swift going of the sun! Tomorrow we will rise early. We will halt presently, for thou art weary.”

“A few hours’ sleep will quite restore me,” answered Middleton.

He slept heavily till the hour before dawn, drugged by his fatigue, and by the strong air of the desert. He was wakened by Meshow.

“Marshallah! It nears the dawn, O my brother: Our journey is nearly at an end,” the Arab said. “We will soon be near the douar of Ahmed Bey.”

Middleton thanked him very heartily for his rescue and escort. He felt sympathetic friendship and brotherhood for this son of the desert.

“The blessing of Allah rests upon us!” said Meshow.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

The Arabs were clustered in large numbers by a group of palms near Ahmed Bey's douar; the space beneath the trees was thronged with the white figures of some other men of the desert, who were strolling like lithe panthers up and down, watching a dense crowd of Arabs who were all talking and gesticulating, apparently under the influence of extreme excitement. Half a dozen mounted camel-men were there, the others standing near in groups.

They were talking violently, and waving their arms. Their conversation, which was in Arabic, sounded violent. A deep murmur of surprise rose from the group of Arabs, and deepened as the Solitary Sheikh appeared suddenly amongst the palms, and came before them. From every side the murmuring of voices rose into the brilliant air.

They were silent suddenly. Ahmed Bey was now approaching them. Behind him came two negroes, with a basket and water-skin, as though preparing for a journey. Ahmed Bey stood king-like there amongst them.

"I have given the order for my men to fill the

water-skins. and to be ready for a start when darkness comes.”

The hush amongst the listening Arabs was intense. They stood in the dim light of the palms, tall and fantastic, with the long, high necks and supercilious heads of their camels swaying above them. Their evening fire threw its red light over the group of hearkening Arabs. The sheikh, Ahmed Bey, was standing with his back to it, his hard, fierce face turned towards his men. The Solitary Sheikh stood still before him, at a little distance, in his flowing white robes.

“Hearken, all of ye!”

Ahmed Bey spoke harshly and abruptly. The accented Arab words were like quick, sharp blows.

“Yusuf hath complained of his sister, the woman Fetneh’s lengthy disappearance from her husband’s donar. And, further, the Frankish people yonder have accused my kinsman of some treachery toward the man whom they name Middleton. They demand that I bring Mahmoud Bey, my cousin, to account for it. Moreover, the Great Solitary One, the Sheikh of all the Sheikhs, hath come to me to make complaint, and hath demanded at my hands the Frank’s appearance here; and at the hands of Mahmoud Bey, my kinsman, on his guests’ behalf. I say nothing to ye of Mahmoud’s previous treachery

toward myself, which was the cause of our late quarrel."

He spoke again, with harsh, abrupt, quick voice. "Hearken, O my brothers! Which of ye will seek for Mahmoud Bey, and bring him to me here?"

The Arabs consulted together in little groups, with occasional oblique glances towards the Solitary Sheikh, who still stood motionless and silent, listening intently. The incessant murmur of their voices seemed hoarse and pathetic—subtly suggestive, too, of danger.

Ahmed Bey had drooped his head in some uneasy thought, and stood motionless before the fire, frowning heavily and pondering. Then the fierce old Arab raised his head again and spoke quickly in Arabic in sharp, imperative, quick sentences. An angry fire was gleaming in his eyes.

They saw the sudden gleam and flutter of white flowing garments, as the Solitary Sheikh stepped forward.

"Allah Akbar! Leave it to Allah, and draw lots if ye cannot settle it amongst ye who will seek Mahmoud Bey."

There was a moment of deep silence. Then from the crowd burst forth the cry of many voices.

"Yea, a sign from Allah! Put it to the trial, and one of us will go."

Fetneh's young brother, Yusuf, now stood forward eagerly.

"I will seek Mahmoud Bey, and will deliver unto him thy message."

Ahmed Bey's hard face was cloudy and almost cruel. He uttered a low, fierce exclamation.

"Merciful Allah! And the Frank! One who hath eaten of our bread and salt! Is this indeed our boasted Arab hospitality?"

A long low murmuring arose once more out of the crowd of Arabs.

"Go, my brothers, many of ye, each seek ye different ways!" said Ahmed Bey. "Seek ye in the desert Mahmoud Bey until ye find him. Mohammed, and thou, O Hassan, take a sufficient number of men with ye. Bring Mahmoud here by force if he will not come willingly."

His voice became fierce for a moment. Then Ahmed Bey disappeared heavily into the shadow of the palms, and Yusuf mounted his horse and rode away, followed by the party of mounted camel-men.

The white figures of the Arabs flitted through the trees. They vanished like phantoms of the night into the desolation of the waste beyond.

Next morning a council was held in the sheikh's house, at which the leading men were all present;

and, on this occasion, in attending it, they wore their swords with silver hilts. Occasional messengers arrived, rode up, and after a few words with the sheikh, they disappeared. Mounted camel-men were instantly despatched, and sent off on flying expeditions. Two horsemen were galloping at a tremendous pace into the desert. The Solitary Sheikh's face was very grave.

An Arab outside the douar presently approached Mr. Cleveland where he stood talking earnestly with Dick, and touched his arm.

"What is it?" he asked hastily, as he turned round to him.

For answer the Arab pointed out across the desert.

"Lo! Far away are two men on camels, and they are riding toward us."

Mr. Cleveland strained his eyes in vain. The distance was so great that he could only be sure that they were men on dromedaries. Two figures indeed were moving swiftly across its expanse, relieved against the ground. He saw them dimly, dipping and rising over the rolling, undulating waste.

"They have no spears!" the Arab said.

As he spoke, they passed over the edge of a depression; in another instant they had disappeared from view.

Far away he could now hear the dull, soft thudding of galloping camels. The other Arabs paid but little heed to the mounted camel-men who were drawing near. They might be only messengers like the rest. But presently the Solitary Sheikh turned quickly, and said something in curt Arabic to Ahmed Bey.

The people of the douar now grew interested, and approached to look. Their keen black eyes roved restlessly around, and now far out across the plain two figures could be distinctly seen.

Thus Meshow and Middleton, arriving, found the group of Arabs awaiting them.

Mr. Cleveland hastened forward eagerly to welcome Middleton. The Arabs, in their grave, dignified fashion, saluted one another. Meshow went apart at once with Ahmed Bey to exchange experiences—and he told his uncle what he knew of Mahmoud. Ahmed Bey and Meshow were talking apart together in that stern and restrained fashion so strange in an Eastern race. The Arabs were watching them with an intent, new interest upon their swarthy faces. And Middleton was gazing at a figure in flowing, white robes, now seen amidst the group of Arabs. The Solitary Sheikh, for it was he, observing this, suddenly withdrew into the soft twilight of the palm grove, where he disappeared from view. Nor did Middleton see him here again that day.

## CHAPTER XIX.

On approaching the quarters of the English party with Mr. Cleveland and his son, Middleton was met most eagerly and heartily by Miss Seraphina and by Cecil, whose sweet face was keen and bright, and flushed with intense joy. Middleton looked eagerly upon her happy countenance, as he took her hand in silent greeting.

When they had all settled down into a state of greater quietude, Dick requested Middleton to give them some account of his experiences amongst the Wandering Bedouins, and he complied, to their great interest.

“These wild tribes lead a most poetical and wonderful life,” said Middleton; “roaming carelessly about from one spot to another; month here, year there, week somewhere else. They live their days as their progenitors lived theirs, when Isaac’s servant met Rebecca at the well—simply pastoral—”

“And simply dirty,” supplemented Dick.

“Their douar was a fit subject for a picture in the evenings,” said Middleton. “When the sun had set, whilst the sky was still a blaze of crimson

and silver, with the lingering afternoon glow, imagine coming slowly homeward from the well, the women and girls, bearing on their heads their water-vessels. Then, driven by gay, dancing urchins, come the lowing herds and bleating goats; the urchins playing on reed flutes. The sound of the women's corn-mills came from the tents, and the blue smoke rose lightly into breathless air."

"Why didn't you attempt escape before?" asked Dick. "Were you watched and guarded all the time?"

"Yes, indeed I was. The noise the Bedouin made at my hut door during the nights was often unendurable. He sometimes spent the whole night shouting verses from the Koran."

"I suppose it was to keep himself awake."

"Yes—but it also kept me awake!"

"Then he killed two birds with one stone!"

"I think the Arabs here are very brave," Miss Seraphina said admiringly. "That fat old sheikh, especially. Talk of courage—pluck—I never saw such nerve! Why, when they came behind him, and fired off a gun close to his ear, the Arab merely smiled!"

"Best of all reasons—he's stone deaf!" said Dick.



“Although the Arabs appear so dignified,” said Cecil, “they are as full of simple curiosity as children.”

“One Arab here reminds me of the old nursery tale where a king, being out a-hunting in his forest, came upon an old woman in a hut there, making apple dumplings. The king was anxious to know how the apples got into the dumplings—and, on being shown, returned hot-foot to his palace, and spent the remainder of the day in his own kitchen, teaching his courtiers to make apple dumplings.”

“I would like to start mothers’ meetings in this village,” remarked Miss Seraphina thoughtfully. “I would teach the women sewing, and cooking, on the English system.”

“I wonder how it’d answer,” said Dick, reflectively.

“Then, the men,” Miss Seraphina said. “I’d give Men’s Teas, and teach them something useful. It is sad to see the Arabs waste their precious time galloping about the desert, carrying big spears!”

“Oh, let the shoemaker stick to his last!” said Dick. “Pray be content to educate the women, and leave the men alone. What can a woman know about men’s occupations?”

“I attended Evening Meetings held in London,” said Miss Seraphina, “where we did all we could,

by mentioning the good that we would do amongst the men."

"But it never seemed to come to anything but talk, and tasty little suppers!" answered Dick.

As soon as he could compass it, Middleton asked Cecil to walk a little way apart with him. When they were out of sight and hearing of the rest, he turned to her, and warmly clasped her hands in his.

"Dearest—you are glad to see me—I can read it in your face. Have absence, and my danger, taught you that you care for me—that I am in your heart? You will give me a kinder answer than the one I had from you before?"

The palm-leaves swayed gently in the evening breeze, and there was no sound save the gentle murmuring from the douar close by. Cecil looked dreamily over the blue distances, at the dimness of shadowy palms at the desert's edge; at the glowing evening sky, and at the misty, distant hills. Then she, for answer, raised her tender and eloquent eyes to his. Ere Middleton could speak again, they were interrupted by her cousin.

But under the stars that night Middleton paced restlessly alone the desert waste outside the sleeping douar. The night was very still and very warm. There was no moon. The waste itself was scarcely visible; a mere dimness of shadowing out-

line showing itself. About the douar there was no sound or stir; absolute silence reigned in the desert. And here he underwent a cruel struggle with himself. For he felt that he had been unfair to Cecil--had taken her at disadvantage--and that he must perforce resign his longed-for happiness.

As the result of these sad musings beneath the stars, next morning he invited Cecil to walk alone with him.

The fresh breeze was in their faces, and the flickering shadows of the swaying palm-trees made a pleasant shade from the hot sun as they went forth into the blue and gold of morning, enveloped in a perfect glow of light and warmth.

"I was too hasty, Cecil, when we spoke together last," said Middleton, hurriedly. "We cannot marry, dear—I had no right to ask you for your love. I must think first of my brother."

Cecil proudly raised her drooping head, and glanced up quickly at him, with a sympathetic look. Her awakened love, with all its unsuspected capabilities and depths, at once had grasped intuitively an outline of the facts. And she felt a rare, keen joy, and an eager admiration for the man who walked beside her, as she noted his expression when he spoke of his brother. She put out her hand and touched his arm caressingly. It was the nearest ap-

proach to tenderness she had put into her manner since they had been together on the ship. And she raised her beautiful, clear eyes to regard him with a look of softness, such as Middleton had never seen in them before.

But the man was slow to understand; afraid to think how much she cared for him.

“You once told me to let you know,” she said, with a lovely radiant look, “if I learnt to care for you.”

“There was a difference in my position then,” said Middleton. “I only realise now what kind of quest I undertook. I made a promise it may take a lifetime to perform. Ah! do not tempt me, Cecil! There seemed a different ending when I spoke before.”

“It is just that difference that made me care for you—it won my heart!”

“I can never hope to win you now,” he answered, sadly. “The difficulties that have arisen are too great. Think not I have abandoned yet for one mischance, my desert quest. Arthur must, and shall be, found! I have tasted the bitterness of this captivity, and I have known the bitter, after-flavour of that taste. Cecil! my vision of the Mirage of the Desert must be realised!”

But Cecil answered gently:—

“Ah! You see it now yourself—I said before that you might change your mind ere I could speak.”

Dearest Cecil—is it possible you do not understand? My heart aches with my pain because I may not speak. I shall be poor when he is found, for I must then transfer to him his rights. I’m not lawfully entitled to my home or my estates. And it may take me more than half my lifetime to fulfil my quest.”

“I love you even more, if that be possible, for that same honourable poverty,” Cecil said, in deeply-shaken tones.

Then, with flushed and burning cheeks, she added, softly:—

“John—must I plead in vain to you for my own happiness. I will assist you in your quest. I will wait patiently for you. And I have enough for both of us—it is your own! I have learnt thoroughly your meaning; when you said once that if I loved, I should know then that it might not be difficult to tell you so!”

They were in a secluded spot, and Middleton suddenly raised his hands and took her face between them very gently. Cecil had begun to tremble. Holding her soft face between his hands, he looked earnestly at her. Then he dropped his

hands again, and drew her closely to his heart. Cecil gave a contented little sigh next moment, for her head was on his breast, and she was in his arms—and he was bending down his head to kiss her quivering, sweet mouth.

She knew now that every hour they had been together on the desert she unconsciously had been turning to him, as to the one man who had gained her whole heart and esteem, and when she thought that he was in great danger—that she perchance had lost him—she had first begun to realise what Middleton was to her.

“Those who appear to be the simplest are often the most complex and most difficult to know, or rightly understand,” said Middleton, thoughtfully. “Some people like their friends to be mysterious. They seem to like best what they cannot understand—doubt and uncertainty still keep them on.”

“No—that, I think, depends on disposition—faith—and temperament. In my opinion, understanding faith is everything—most people seem to like best what they understand.”

“To be in doubt would weary some, drive others mad. Doubting things go wrong oft hurts more than to be sure they do!”

“Better to have the most hopeless separation and most miserable misunderstanding than to lose

faith in one's friend," said Cecil, fervently; "or to lose belief in their worth."

"If one likes things they seem perfect. If one does not care, perfection itself is nothing. One is sensible of no loss as long as one can trust, believe."

Then Middleton told Cecil of his journey homewards with Meshow, under sun, and moon, and stars; and alone together in the dark.

"Night travelling has a potent charm for me," he said. "The night on the waste is dry and clear, the breath of the wilderness so soothing; the whisper of the desert so mysterious."

"The great waste is so still," said Cecil; "it stretches before one dimly, seeming to draw one ever forward."

"The air is soft and sweet, as it passes tenderly across one's fevered brow," said Middleton. "The measured step of the dromedary on the sand moves with the same fresh and unwearied tread as it did when one first started in the morning."

Middleton spoke feelingly about Meshow.

"I shall never forget our friend of the desert!" Cecil said.

"The only reason," said Middleton, "that I can think of why Meshow should have shown me such devotion is his adventurous disposition; for he posi-

tively seemed to delight in the risk he ran himself at the hands of the Bedouins in rescuing me.”

But Cecil, for the first time since their meeting, turned her head away from Middleton, gazing yearningly away into the distance. For she was troubled in her soul. And once again she saw, in thought, Meshow’s great adoration for her glowing in his deep poetie eyes.

“I never grasped a hand in sad farewell with deeper or more kindly feelings,” she said long afterwards to Middleton, “than I did that of this nobly-born and noble-minded Arab who risked his life to aid me, and who practically gave it in my service!”



## CHAPTER XX.

The next afternoon came Yusuf galloping towards the douar with his party of camel-men, and Mahmoud Bey upon his mare Feyruzah. And Mahmoud Bey laughed scornfully as he rode by.

The Arabs saw them coming, and waved their lances in the air in welcome to their friends. They had never heard the sound of them on the soft, shifting sand, and against the strong desert wind that had sprung up. The graceful heads were tossed, and the limbs of the horses quivered restlessly as they pulled up; and, leaping off his horse, Yusuf went straight into the sheikh's house.

When, in a few moments, he came forth again, Ahmed Bey was with him. He gave rapid orders, and the douar hummed like a hive with busy Arabs. The young sheikh, Meshow, came over and stood by his uncle's side as he confronted Mahmoud. The Arabs, greatly interested, stood round, listening; and Middleton was staring at the white-robed figure of the Solitary Sheikh, as he advanced towards them through the twilight of the palm-grove, coming

forth into the golden vistas from the dusky shadows of the trees.

Ahmed Bey stood like a graven image; but his cousin showed no perturbation. Ahmed Bey's face became hard and severe; his Arab dignity and reserve forbade expression of his grievous wrath and wounded feelings. Though a barbarian, he was a kingly and majestic man.

The waiting hush amongst the hearkening Arabs was extreme. There was a moment of deep silence. Then from the crowd burst forth the cry of many voices:—

“Put it to the trial, and may Allah judge between them!”

“Such things are in the hands of Allah only,” said the Solitary Sheikh, who had been hearkening in silence, speaking now for the first time.

A long, low murmuring arose once more out of the crowd of Arabs. The Solitary Sheikh's words had appealed to them.

“Allah Akbar! God is just!”

“Praise to Allah!”

Ahmed Bey's face became fierce for a moment as he looked at Mahmoud.

“We have heard the story of thy treachery towards the Frank,” said Ahmed Bey. “Now we de-

mand of thee that thou produce to us thy wife, the woman Fetneh."

"What hast thou done with my sister, Fetneh, she who was thy wife?" demanded Yusuf. fiercely. "Wilt thou answer now, O Mahmoud Bey?"

The gentle, languorous youth was now quite roused and altered.

"She is where thou shalt not find her, O my brother! Yet shalt thou seek her there," was the enigmatic answer. "Allah is good, and Paradise is very pleasant!"

"Has the woman lived or died?"

"Allah is just, and He takes life for life!"

"Of Allah will I speak to thee hereafter. Tell me, where is the woman?"

"She is hidden in the desert—go, seek her in the ruined old Mosque! I have spoken—let me now depart in peace."

"By Allah! No!" shouted Yusuf. "I come in war to settle my account. If I conquer, I will offer to thee choice between death and full confession."

"It shall not be required. Empty drums make the loudest noise!" Mahmoud answered scornfully.

Yusuf sprang to one side suddenly, so that Mahmoud's spear missed him by a hair's breadth.

"Dog! Allah will avenge thy treachery upon thee!"

Mahmoud suddenly threw off all pretence of graceful calm, and poured forth a seething, molten torrent of vehement Arabic, accompanying it with passionate gestures.

“By the Prophet’s beard,” said Mahmoud, fiercely, “I will avenge Allah on thee! Harken! Fetneh was my betrothed—yet thereafter she betrayed my love—and therefore sought I vengeance! Then seek thou thy sister in the lonely desert Mosque!”

“The oasis and the mosque could not be reached by the swiftest camel under several days’ journey from this place,” said Yusuf gloomily.

“Thou would’st be too late to save her, O Yusuf,” Mahmoud answered, with a bitter sneer.

Yusuf bowed his head, and turned his face away in silence. Then he answered slowly:—

“Merciful Allah! Meanest thou I am too late already?—It is Kismet!”

He turned away, heart-sick, in that silence beyond speech.

Then came sudden change. Yusuf’s heart was beating fast and madly, and he felt a burning in his brain.

“As Allah lives, I will do unto thee even as thou hast done to Fetneh. Thou, too, shalt perish miserably in the desert mosque.”

A sudden look of apprehension and of great horror came on Mahmoud's face.

Then Yusuf's blood turned to liquid fire.

But a sinister expression crept into Mahmoud's subtle face.

"By Mahomet's beard! I am not conquered yet!"

He looked at Yusuf with cruel, crafty eyes. Yusuf's wild, dark eyes were flashing murderously. A flame burnt fiercely up within his heart, and even as the light of day turned red, so the white heat of an unsparing anger burnt within his brain. Then came swift and sudden vengeance.

"My heart is on fire! My brain burns. The pulses in my temples throb with anguish. O Allah, have I not borne enough already? I will avenge my sister on thee!"

Mahmoud had turned away from him, and suddenly he sprang upon his horse to fly. In another instant Yusuf had shot Mahmoud's horse from under him. The scream of the mare as it staggered under him rang pathetically in the bystanders' ears.

Then this strange, fierce son of the desert, on rising to his feet, lifted up his mare's head in his arms, whilst his tears fell fast.

"Alas, Feyruzah—never more wilt thou bear thy master like the wings of the wind across the

desert! O Allah, avenge me quickly! Ah, woe! woe!”

The Arabs all stood watching him with deep interest. They stood grave and silent, pitying him, perhaps, within their hearts.

Then Mahmoud Bey burst forth, at last, with his confession.

“At the last,” he said, “did Fetneh cry to me for mercy—and I let her die. Repenting, in a little while did I return to her, and it was too late. It was written! What is done is done. Thou mayest take my life for hers, but thou canst not bring the woman back to life,” he added heavily.

His face was set—afterwards Middleton told himself it had a fatalistic look.

Silently in the gathering shadows had the Arabs heard the tale. The most awful stillness succeeded. There was no moving thing. It was a hot, close afternoon, and the air came in scorching waves.

“Take my life!” Mahmoud cried out passionately, in Arabic. “Take it, for it is now worthless to me—and let me depart in peace to Paradise. Feyruzah gone, I now have nought to live for!”

Then again, a sudden change swept over him, as his eyes fell on Meshow.

“Thou didst release from his captivity, O Me-

show, the accursed Frank, who is the cause of all my woe!"

There was a sudden flash—a spear flew past—a faint sobbing cry of mortal anguish. And Meshow sank on the sand, shot through the breast.

At the same instant Mahmoud sprang on the dismounted Ghudda's horse, and fled away—escaping far beyond pursuit into the waste. Ghudda remained there, standing quietly, and looking after the flying steed with yearning eyes. With a strange mixture of sadness and of pride, he said:—

"I would not shame thee by pursuit, O beloved! There is none can overtake my mare, Zeenab, when she goeth at her best!"

So Mahmoud Bey passed from their life and knowledge, and their sight, for ever.

Cecil was hurrying forth to come to them, when Ghudda rushed up hastily to her tent.

"There has been some fighting. Meshow is wounded, and he lieth near. He asks for thee, O lady, to say farewell, ere he departeth unto Paradise. Therefore, came I here to seek thee."

Cecil quickly followed him, and knelt beside the dying Arab, weeping, as she bent over him. But Meshow smiled.

"Weepest thou for me, O Lady of Light? Are

thy precious tears indeed for me! O life! Then I die happy!"

"You have given up your life in service to me, and have lost it," she said sadly, in the fluent Arabic he himself had taught her. "Live for me, Meshow!"

"Nay, O lady, it is Kismet! It is Allah's will I now depart. I have saved thy beloved for thee," he murmured, "and my soul is satisfied. I cannot live for thee as I desired to live. Therefore is it best I die. Be content, for Allah is all-wise—doth all things well."

Cecil tried in vain to thank him for his service, but her tears fell fast, and Meshow stopped her, saying:—

"It is nothing, O light of mine eyes—for I have loved thee!"

He had answered her with a sweet gravity, an ever-deepening pathos in his faint tones; and now repeated slowly:—

"Allah is all-wise and merciful—my time hath surely come! God is the only God—Mahomet is His Prophet!"

As he spoke he closed his eyes.

Cecil gently took his hands in hers, but she could not speak.

He presently unclosed his eyes again.

"Good-bye," said Meshow, with a faint smile.



“And remember, when thou art in far-away lands, thou hadst once a friend in the Great Desert!”

His eyes had the far-off intentness of one who saw beyond the view of his companions.

“There—where the sky touches earth—Paradise—What is written, is written!”

## CHAPTER XXI.

As the party approached the douar of the Solitary Sheikh, some few days later on, Middleton observed fresh pastures of one universal green. And shrubs, and plants, and palms. Where the heat of the arid waste was exchanged for the fresh and cooling breeze; and where the vast solitudes of the desert were no more.

Then, at a pleasant rising of the land, grass took the place of shrubs and plants, and the long swells of rich pasturage were dotted with fat camels and their young. It was a sudden change from the arid to the fertile, and from silent desolation to the tuneful. They inhaled the fragrance of sweet flowers, and heard the cheerful bleating of the sheep and goats, and merry cries of Arab children, sporting on the fresh green turf.

Then they came into a land of palm-gardens, where they heard the soft cooing of the pigeons amid a golden calm, and saw them flying over the palms. Here an Arab approached Middleton.

“The Solitary Sheikh would speak with thee, O Frank, beneath the palms. Under the date-palms in the grove the Solitary One awaiteth thee.”

Middleton went thither with all haste, to an alley between walls of brown earth, where there were many palms with tufted dark green foliage. As far as eyes could see stretched the groves of palms, the feathery tops swaying in the gentle wind, now blowing in freshly from the desert.

Here no man appeared in view, no huts were seen by Middleton, no Arab robe was moving along the softly-tinted shadows. But a blazing radiance shone all around, a perfect flood of richest blue and gold; and the sand, where his feet touched it, was golden in the golden light.

Under the tall, straight, plummy palms, with their clusters of yellow or purple fruit, there was a softened dimness. Where the palms cast their fantastic shadows on the sand, contrasting with the sunlight where the shade of foliage ceased, he saw a white-robed figure under a large palm-tree, standing motionless as Arabs often stand. At a little distance his figure had been almost lost in the deep shadows of the trees. This was the Solitary Sheikh, whose welcome to Middleton was a quiet smile and a warm grasp of the hand.

The full grey eyes in the Sheikh's dark face, that so attracted Arabs, betrayed at once to Middleton alien blood, although his cheeks were browned by many desert suns.

“I have longed greatly for this meeting,” said Middleton, eagerly, “for I wish to ask your help. I have heard strange rumours of an Englishman who mysteriously appeared, and then seemed to vanish as mysteriously amongst the Arabs in the desert.”

The Solitary Sheikh had turned his head aside, and looked away towards the dense thickets of the palms.

Middleton paused suddenly, and looked more closely at his companion. A sudden thought flashed through his active mind.

“I had a brother once,” he said, impulsively. “He made no sign for many years, and could not be traced; so that many of his friends believed him dead. But I have heard these rumours, and I ask if you have power and inclination to help me find this missing Englishman, lest he may be my brother?”

In the dark, bearded, agitated face, now turned to him, was an old look that Middleton seemed to know.

“I implore you to assist me find my brother! I believe there is something in these tales amongst the Arabs here concerning the Englishman.”

“What!” the Solitary Sheikh cried suddenly, in purest English. “You desire to seek your

brother, who would rob you of your well-loved home, when found, and who would practically beggar you as a return?"

Middleton started violently, and caught the Arab's hand in his.

"You are no Arab!" he exclaimed, vehemently.

He felt the contact of a ring upon the hand of the Solitary Sheikh, and raised his hand to look at it. He saw a signet ring upon his finger, and the blood rushed to his face in a hot flood.

"I know this ring! You are the Englishman--and my lost brother! Arthur—is it possible? Oh, I was blind indeed, for I can trace the likeness now, in spite of the disguise of this strange dress. You are my brother!"

His brother grasped his hands, but could not speak. After a little meditative thought he responded anxiously:—

"If I went home, Jack, what would you do now?"

"I?" returned Middleton, gladly, with no anxiety at all. "Oh, I have much to tell you, Arthur—be content!"

He smiled happily to himself as he thought of a certain pair of beautiful and sympathetic violet eyes. He was still wondering what reason Arthur

would give for his long silence. Wondered greatly what had been his motive for it—what story he would tell. No suspicion of the truth had dawned yet on his mind.

But he watched his brother, with a momentary struggle in his breast. In his vigil beneath the stars he had felt it would be doubly hard to give up his position and his wealth now, when he might win Cecil, though natural affection would have gladly welcomed back his brother from the lost or dead.

He had often thought of their old boyish days together—and of their difference of character in the old times. He, the younger, clever, bright, and brilliantly gifted; physically strong, protective. And Arthur, slight and delicate of make, retiring, studious, and diffident—ever looking up to him at every turn with loving confidence and admiration; depending on him, leaning on his strength.

These early recollections helped him now. He felt keenly the old loving and protective instinct waking strongly in his breast. Now that he had found him, Arthur, if need be, should have good cause to trust, depend, lean on him still. He, John, would now resign to him with joy his rightful place, and use his love and strength to make him grace it well.

“I am become a perpetual seeker after know-

ledge—an earnest student of the sacred lore and learning of the East,” said Arthur presently; “and I am happy here. I should be miserable and unfit in cities now. I dearly love and prize these desert solitudes. And I am in keen sympathy with this wild people, who love and fear, and almost worship me, as one descended from Mahomet, their own Prophet. I have a motive for remaining in the desert. In a way I have become a visionary—I feel that I indeed am something of a seer and a prophet amongst the Arabs, whom I love and understand. And I myself am something of a fatalist. Yea, even I believe in Kismet, with the most sincere amongst the many followers of Mahomet.”

Middleton said gravely:—

“Why did you act thus, at first? Did you see the advertisements—receive our letters to you?”

“The earlier ones I did receive. Afterwards I knew, if I returned, the chances were you would already have assumed my own position, and be in assured possession of the property. I could not endure the thought of dispossessing you, so I remained away. It was all that I could do. And I penetrated then into the farthest places of the desert I have learnt to love. You have heard a portion of my story—it is rife amongst the Arabs how I came amongst them. With my sun-darkened face, and

my dark hair, I have always passed amongst them as an Arab. I know now that I am eminently fitted for this kind of life," he added, with a slow and grave, faint smile.

Middleton thought often afterwards that Arthur's look was almost sad, and fatalistic.

"Do not say that, Arthur!" he responded, with emotion. "It cuts me to the heart!"

"My father always loved you best," his brother added, simply. And Middleton winced to hear. "You were better fitted than myself to take his place, for you were practical—whilst I was always dreaming. Recollect, my brother, the old bond between us! And, moreover, it would be too late—quite useless now!"

"No! It need never be too late. You must return to England," Middleton said, firmly, "and there take your rightful place. It is my heartfelt wish!"

A last secret twinge of regret and pain shot through his heart as he remembered all it meant to him—but it was quickly conquered—for had he not won Cecil through this very loss? And his last regret was altogether banished by the sight of the sun-darkened, noble, soulful, and unselfish face before him, as Arthur quickly turned to him and grasped John's hands in his.



“Dear old fellow—my heart overflows with love, and my old pride in you!”

“Why did you do it, Arthur?” Middleton asked again, with a great wonder in his soul, remembering his own late seathing pain in that silent watch of night under the desert stars, upon the plain, when he was mentally relinquishing his deeply-valued dignity and position in his own land.

“Perhaps it did—at first!” his brother said, with a faint smile. “I was a dreaming youngster, suddenly aroused to an unwonted anger by the cruel injustice of a hard old man. And you were his favourite son—but we were always friends, Jack, were we not?”

He turned to Middleton, and placed his hand upon his shoulder in the old loving fashion.

“And now I have a motive for remaining in the desert!”

“How came all this about?” asked Middleton, wondering, as he observed him with keen interest.

“I had ever felt confined, environed by my life in a civilised and overcrowded world. I desired a greater freedom. I desired a limitless horizon; the free winds of heaven; the golden glory of the sun; unrestrained wide spaces; glowing, radiant, noontide heat; and mysterious, silent nights. I wished to be

myself absorbed in an immensity of space and loneliness of which I had often dreamed.

“On my journey hither, one day I was riding over desolate tracts in the heart of the great desert. I was wearied, and felt almost in a trance. The strong atmosphere, the clear sky, and the endless flats devoid of vegetation, and without signs of life—and the monotonous motion of my dromedary—all these things combined together to dull my brain, and to throw me into a strange, unwonted state. Then the mysticism of the desert first came upon me with the wonder of its silence. Till that moment I had never known what solitude really was. The desert spoke to me that day for the first time,” said Arthur, dreamily. “The extreme desolation of the flats around me, now fading in the shades of evening, stirred in my soul an overwhelming, strong desire. I longed to be for ever far away from the abodes of civilised men, and amongst the desert tents, among the everlasting dunes. Though it seemed solitary in the desert, also there were men and homes. I desired to feel the blank, wide emptiness of this weird world, so far way from that of the intolerable cramping world which had so long been mine.

“Remember that I was a disappointed man, who had first fled to loneliness in bitterness of spirit. But

I was also an imaginative man, with dreams of freedom from the enforced restraint of civilisation. I sought a simple state of life in the great desert, and I found it there.

“Although I am now used to the strange, mesmeric influence of the desert, its wild, quaint solitude and mysteries still greatly move me,” Arthur said reflectively. “For from this land of throbbing, fluctuating, quivering light and heat, these children of the sun still draw their tranquil resignation.”

An expression came into his face that quite transfigured it. A look so pitiful and tender, and so mystical—an expression that betrayed the inner soul of the man. It was a look of sweet and silent abnegation. Arthur seemed to Middleton to possess hitherto unknown depths of imagination, magnetism, tenderness—and a subtle touch of mysticism.

“I have many strange beliefs,” he said, “that I had not before. Perhaps it is the influence of the solitudes, and the wide wastes, that has turned an unbiassed English mind to Eastern superstition. The truth is, I think, that in these solitudes, one can believe what one would find it difficult, if not impossible, to believe in a life of civilisation.”

“Do you believe the creed of the Arabs?”

“I believe at least a portion of their creed.”

A creed that is held with fanaticism—even cruelty,” said Middleton decisively.

“Not so,” the Solitary Sheikh said earnestly. “He who has birth in the desert is an impenetrable mystery to Englishmen. Though it appears to be obscure and incomprehensible, the desert is as full of meaning as of countless grains of sand. And even in the women of the desert fatalism works.”

“Do you believe that desert men can truly read the future in the desert sand?” asked Middleton.

“Many strange things exist,” responded Arthur gravely. “One day I visited a sand-diviner, far off in the desert—one who reads one’s past and prophesies one’s future in the grains of sand. As I came upon him he was chanting weird words of Arabic—and I saw him gazing out through the low doorway of his hut upon the shimmering flats. He was a great, gaunt Arab, one of the true desert men, in whom there was a grandeur, though he was but a savage, like the other Arabs.”

Middleton regarded Arthur, as he paused, with affectionate attention.

“What did this sand-diviner read for you?”

“That my Kismet lies here in the desert sand,” he answered gravely.

The dreamy look had left him. He stood in an alert, awakened attitude.

“But when I questioned further, he gazed upon me as on one who vainly questions unknown mysteries.

“ ‘Thou art still at heart a Frank, and therefore an alien,’ he said at last. ‘Thou hast not yet studied in the East—the people of the East. Thou hast not studied in the desert solitudes. How, then, shouldst thou learn such matters? They are hidden from the Unbeliever! First must thou believe—then wilt thou understand.’ ”

“And are you now a full believer of the faith?” asked Middleton.

“I simply accepted the faith of Islam as I read it, with my own reservations,” Arthur said. “I was afterwards elected as their Sheikh of all the Sheikhs. And thus I have it in my power to do much good.”

“I do not possess much knowledge of the Arab character or faith,” said Middleton. “But I understand you are now practically an Oriental, that you accept the religion of the Arabs, and that you understand the Arab point of view. You have gained the same fashion of looking at things?”

“The pious trust and resignation of the faithful is not as the reserved, more grudging resigna-

tion of the Unbeliever—and it is not fitting that we question too closely the ways of God in any faith,” responded Arthur gravely. “I think mere tenets do not signify, if it be the root and groundwork of all faiths that God is good.”

“Even I am much affected by the cry of the Muezzin, and the Call to Prayer,” said Middleton.

“When first, in the city of Morocco, the plaintive notes of the Muezzin’s voice broke on my ear, with its prolonged, sweet call, I felt a strange sensation,” Arthur said. “On the atmosphere it floated from the minaret of a mosque close by, calling the faithful to their prayers. It died away, and was sonorously renewed again three times.

“Then, again, when in the desert, I saw the Moslems turn their faces towards Mecca, fall upon their knees, and bend their heads to pray. The kneeling Arabs bowed their heads low to the sands with ceaseless murmuring, their fingers fluttering on the beads strung round their necks. I saw old men, young boys, strong, fierce-eyed Arabs praying together, their white-robed figures swaying slowly to and fro. Yet their fierce gaze did not soften with the cry of Allah’s name upon their lips. The moon was rising over the palm-gardens; the moon climbed in the sky, and threw a soft and silvery light upon the scene. I stood beneath the palm-trees, looking

upon them, and felt no astonishment at finding that I did not shrink from these barbarians, proud children of the sun, and wind-swept deserts. Looking round upon the praying Arabs, I felt I was at heart as fatalistic as any one of them. Though as yet I could not understand their tongue, they did not seem like strangers. And, from the first, I felt a strong attraction for the Moslem faith," he added thoughtfully. "Its quiet resignation and its fatalism in a way appealed to me. Here I have had ample opportunity to study, and discover for myself its hidden inner meaning.

"I have received a priceless gift from the desert," Arthur added thoughtfully. "In the sunrise and the sunset—in the glowing sky, the misty, distant mountains, the palm-groves; and, most of all, in these mysterious, sweet solitudes. In the purple outline of the hills I love; the fluctuating foliage of the palms; the rose-tinted glory of the West. And in the whisper of the desert wind, as it sighs in the night."

"The Arabs cherish an ingrained, barbaric, proud contempt of civilisation," said Middleton, musingly; "yet they say their prayers five times a day in obedience to the order of their Prophet."

"For me they possessed a fanaticism and a fascinating fatalism that I longed to understand.

As the seeming idols of the Hindus are only symbolic charms or mere symbols, and not gods, as some believe—so behind it all I felt that to them the ideal is higher than the merely material—for see them at their prayers, their faces ever turned towards the East and Mecca, and behind them all the splendour of the setting sun.”

“Theirs is a fatalistic mystery in which devotion and indifference most strangely seem to mingle,” suggested Middleton. “Their faith appears to me to be a kind of mere fatalistic philosophy.

‘The moving finger writes; and having writ,  
Moves on; nor all thy Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,  
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.’  
To everything the Arab says, ‘It is written’—and takes it as a matter of course—an undisputed and simply-accepted fact.”

“This is my belief—this is the root and groundwork of all creeds,” repeated Arthur. “There is but one God—and God is good! To the believer only are the good things of Allah given.”

“The rain falls alike on the just and the unjust,” objected Middleton.

“But with a difference,” replied his brother gravely.



“Kismet!” Middleton said thoughtfully. “Arthur, what do you take to be the literal, true meaning of the word?”

“It means Fate, and willing acceptance of and patient resignation to that fate.”

“You are, then, truly a Mohammedan at heart?” exclaimed Middleton.

“Though the Arabs say I accepted the Law as it is written, I have not actually embraced the full tenets of the Moslem faith—neither do I conform to all their usages. But the most fanatical of the Arabs respect the reservations of the Solitary Sheikh. Nevertheless, the solitudes of the desert have given me a precious gift—that of belief. It seemed to me almost as though I had myself received some power to divine the future—and I am always waiting—waiting—for the revelation of the will of Allah.”

“You are indeed as fatalistic as an Arab,” said Middleton, in wonder.

“I am almost an Arab,” replied Arthur gravely. “From the first I had felt the glamour and wild phantasy of the desert steal over me and invade my soul,” he added dreamily, in still, awed tones. “Ah! since that hour I have known and understood that feeling well. It was the weird and silent desert call to me. And in a moment I understood.

As I sat in the silence of the dunes, looking out over the desert from my solitary tent, I could hear its voice calling, for ever calling insistently to me. I could hear it in the wind, the sunshine, and the air. The strange, silent murmur of the desert—the caressing murmur of the wind—the warm kiss of the sun—the whisper of the palm-leaves the faint breeze was stealing through. And in that which sometimes cometh to me, borne on the wings of the storm.

“And then first I knew that the desert, in giving me a precious gift, had also taken something away from me. My ancient dreams, my hopes—and I felt awed—for in the waste we must forget some things we care for—and know nothing of them any more.”

“Were you not afraid?”

“No sense of apprehension came to me, for I had no fear whatever of the desert, for I knew that I would come to know and love it well. I felt inspired; I felt a strong belief that in the desert loneliness I would learn more than I could learn at home—for is not solitude the nurse of wisdom? And then I suddenly seemed to understand the fascination it possessed for me. It was the call of the Desert! And I know, too, that I will obey the irresistible last summons of the desert, when it comes to me!”

“You will be happy and content alone—alone in the desert—now?” asked Middleton, brokenly, with intense feeling.

“Some inherent fatalism of my own still tells me so,” said Arthur. “Then remember my acquired affection for the Arabs, and my love of solitude, and of this simple life. My word is law to the refractory tribes amongst whom I dwell,” he added presently. “I am looked up to as a Prophet by the Arabs. By some am actually believed to be descended from Mahomet, and my actions therefore pass unquestioned.”

“And what if question ever should arise—compliance be demanded?” Middleton inquired, with some anxiety.

“I would die for my own reservations, for my Christianity!” Arthur answered, sternly, an unwonted fire kindling in the depths of his calm eyes. “But I hope yet to convert the Arabs gradually to my faith. I live, I work, I wait for this, and for the time to come!”

The expression in his face had quite transfigured it. There was a gentle smile in his eyes, and a look half mystical, and half of intense, silent abnegation.

“I am become a visionary,” Arthur said again;

“almost a believer of the Moslem faith—with reservations—and I wish to teach my Arabs these.”

Arthur spoke with feeling—even exaltation in his tones. He turned his head towards the West, and raised his hand.

“It will soon be time for evening prayer,” he said. “Lo, even now the sun is going down behind the distant violet bank of the horizon. It is near the hour for evening prayer. Behold the swift going of the sun!”

He walked with Middleton towards his house, and entered it alone. He soon came forth again, in one hand carrying a small, rich praying-carpet, in the other a parchment copy of the Koran.

Out on the warm, clear air came presently his long-drawn, sonorous call:—

“I testify that God is God!”

And with a sudden rush of passion came the answer from the Arabs:—

“God is God—there is no God but God!”

Rapt, absorbed, the desert Arabs prayed around the Great Solitary One, their Sheikh of all the Sheikhs!

## CHAPTER XXII.

The Solitary Sheikh was sitting under the palms with Middleton and Cecil, in the warm glow of afternoon, engaged in earnest conversation.

When Middleton had brought his betrothed to him, he had gazed at her a little pensively. Then he took her hand in his, with a grave smile.

"I felt an indefinable interest in you when first we met," he said, "and when mine eyes first fell upon your face. Of a surety, it must have been pre-vision there would be some future bond betwixt us!"

"I have heard much of you from John," said Cecil; "and I almost felt I knew you."

"Have you learnt anything more of the unhappy Fetneh's fate?" asked Middleton.

"The Arabs think that Mahmoud Bey hath surely taken her away with him. When they came to the mosque, they found signs he had visited it recently—and the woman was not there."

"It is horrible to reflect upon the awful loneliness of Fetneh's death," said Cecil, sadly. "It is that loneliness that seems most terrible. Hapless

Fetneh! Dying alone in that wild, dreary waste, in the darkness of the ruined old mosque—a waste inhabited but by the wild things of the wind-swept desert! No loving eye to watch compassionately—no friendly hand to comfort her with its warm clasp.”

“How ruthless seems the law that sets woman thus apart from man amongst these white-robed savages,” said Middleton.

“Women are ever set apart by the men of the East,” Arthur answered sternly. “It is for them a hopeless fate!”

“I believe,” said Middleton, “there was a most unusual romantic history regarding Fetneh’s origin. She hinted something of it in her talk with me.”

“The grandmother of Fetneh was a foundling,” Arthur said; “who was adopted by the ruling sheikh of the tribe. As the story ran, a sick Englishman arrived at the douar with a young child, and, dying there soon afterwards, he left her to the sheikh’s care. On reaching early womanhood, she was married to the eldest son of the sheikh, and had one daughter, who was Fetneh’s mother. Both Fetneh and her mother were permitted an unusual amount of freedom from restraint; and this unusual treatment amongst the Arab women, as well as the strain of the free British blood, accounted

for their bolder temperament, and the superiority of their position, as well as the unusual respect in which they were held amongst the Arabs, who were strangely proud of them."

"Uncle James is talking of returning shortly to Algiers," said Cecil presently.

"I should like to go, but for one single reason. For my quest here now is ended," added Middleton, with a sigh.

"I will provide ye an escort to guide and guard ye safely back to Algiers," said the Solitary Sheikh.

"Will you not return with us to your own land?" asked Cecil wistfully.

But Arthur shook his head.

"You will come one day, Arthur—if not with us?" said Middleton earnestly.

"One day, perhaps, I may return—aye, when my loved and chosen work here is accomplished—not before! Remain here with me yet a little while—then will I set ye forth upon the way."

When the time for their departure came, Arthur rode with them a little way, and as they passed near the douar of Ahmed Bey, Cecil, pausing, turned her head to take a lingering farewell look behind her at the distant spot beneath the palms where was Meshow's desert grave.

The Solitary Sheikh rode yet a little way with

the departing caravan. As he grasped his brother's hand at last to say farewell, he said to him:—

“I know not whether we shall ever meet again. This is a thing that I cannot divine. My best desires go with ye, as my best hopes are yours!”

He paused a little while, still holding Middleton's hand in a last, lingering, warm clasp. Then, with a far-away look he said:—

“Peradventure one day we may hap to meet again—I may yet follow ye—but the time will be long first—for my work here is not done.”

He released his brother's hand, and, half-sighing, turned away.

He then appeared to hearken with intensity to some far-distant sound they could not hear. Remaining motionless in an attitude of deep, absorbed attention. The sunlight falling on him brightened his countenance. There was something even passionately attentive in his manner—something of strained eagerness in his expression. Arthur's eyes had the far-off intentness as of one who listens with every fibre of his being—every nerve on the alert. They could only hear the faintest sighing of the gentle breeze across the waste. Then the faint, gradually on-coming noise, as of a strange, low rushing wind came to their ears.



“Hark!” Arthur said. “It is the last call of the Desert. The Desert calleth me—I must obey the summons! I may not stay—farewell!—away—away!”

He turned his horse’s head towards the distant desert, and they stood watching him depart, with deep feelings of regret.

“Look!” breathed Cecil suddenly. “There is the Mirage!”

“It may be that Mirage is a mere reflection of one’s mind,” said Middleton thoughtfully, as he looked long after him.

Into the quivering haze rode the Great Solitary Sheikh, in his white, flowing garments, on his milk-white mare; disappearing from their view.

Seen for the second time in Mirage, riding slowly into it—the Mirage of the Desert!

FINIS.



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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# The Daughter of a Soldier

## AND OTHER STORIES

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